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GERARD FAIRLIE

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FAIRLIE

LITTLE, BROWN
AND COMPANY

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Frances Teffeteller

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## By Gerard Fairlie

Scissors Cut Paper
The Man Who Laughed
Stone Blunts Scissors
Yellow Munro

# THE MUSTER OF THE VULTURES

BY

GERARD FAIRLIE

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# THE MUSTER OF THE VULTURES

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## CHAPTER I

ONE by one the shadowy figures, indistinct in the twilight of the evening, passed unnoticed into the tavern of the dark, silent street. The smell of the river, not so far away, seemed to permeate the atmosphere; a fishy odour, which perhaps might have been expected, was strengthened by the refuse of the dirty alley, left uncleared for many days. The houses were ramshackle, great gaping holes being visible as dark, even ominous patches. This was a locality where men drew their coats close to them and passed through, if pass they must, with hastened footsteps.

One by one these figures entered the inn, and mixed with the cosmopolitan crowd inside. They were indeed a strange lot, those who frequented this unsavoury public house. Chinamen, shining yellow in the ill-lighted, small and filthy room, Germans, a sprinkling of Frenchmen, a few Englishmen, Jews of all the nations too, a Negro here and there, as motley a crowd as could be found anywhere. But they had one thing in common. All of them were sly, all had the sharp look in the ever alert eyes which betokens lawlessness, a slinking courage sometimes, and invariably a fear, perchance allied to hatred, of law and order.

One by one those figures, keeping to the shadows of the room, passed through into the parlour beyond. One minute they were in the common room, the next they were gone. It was a transit both rapid and unostentatious and if they were noticed at all their presence was immediately forgotten. Their passage was fleeting and swift, but not so swift that it was likely to make any impression on the drink-sodden minds of the casual customers seated round the roughly fashioned wooden tables. One or two even sat down in a corner for a drink before continuing through the great oak door: but had a man been present to watch he would have noticed that no single one ever dallied at a table except one that was in the shadows and unoccupied.

Once through the door, each figure moved more swiftly still. Across the room, and through another door out into a tiny, foul-smelling yard beyond. Straight across this and into a low-roofed hut at the far end: no light within, but this did not seem to matter. With unerring judgment each man felt for and found a trapdoor under the thick covering of the straw; each man lifted this and lowered himself down several steps. Thence along a passage and then a pause.

Something went on there, something ritual. It took a moment or two only but each of the dozen or so men paused here and pulled some flimsy covering over his head. Concealed in the shadows an observer might have seen a change of shape about the head. Then a knock and another pause. A flash of light, blinding because of its unexpected brilliance to eyes accustomed to the prevailing gloom, followed quickly as the door opened. The figure passed through, the door was closed, the light was gone. Perhaps a rat, surprised at the interruption, scampered noisily towards its damp dwelling place. Then, once again, silence.

The last of these figures arrived at the door. A smaller figure this, than the others: but just as dingy, as unostentatious, as shadowy as the rest. Again the pause, again the knock; then the momentary stream of light which was instantly to vanish as the door closed behind the vague form.

"Ah!" said a voice. "You are late, my dear."

There came no reply from the strange figure standing just inside the door. It stood quite still, an impression of sexlessness conveyed by a long silken robe, which hung in loose folds from the neck to within an inch or two of the floor. But, odd as was the robe itself, there was about the figure something still stranger, for the head and features were completely obscured by a mask which resembled the head of a vulture. Motionless the form remained there, speechless, awe-inspiring.

"I am sorry." Suddenly it spoke. "I could not come more quickly. You must remember that I had a long way to travel, and the traffic of London. . . ."

She left the unfinished sentence perfectly intelligible to her listeners.

She . . . this, a vulture . . . was a woman, of that there could be no doubt. For it was a woman's voice that had spoken, a voice pleasant to the ear, a voice which gave promise of delicate features, powder and femininity behind that hideous mask.

She looked around the room, her eyes now accustomed to the brilliant lighting.

A long table faced her, a long table which resembled a refectory table from some ancient monastery. Seated facing her were ten figures, all garbed as she was and each wearing a similar mask. The man who had first spoken was watching her, she knew, from behind the eyeholes of this vulture headdress. The others sat motionless. On his left was a vacant chair.

She moved round the table and took her seat in the vacant chair; every place round the weird table was now occupied.

"We are all here," said he who evidently was the leader, after a short pause. "Let us start with the business of the evening."

He fumbled with the folds of his black robe and produced a slip of paper.

"We are only eleven!" suddenly cried a voice.

The effect was electrical. Every grotesque head was first turned towards the speaker; then each glanced round the table evidently counting.

"We are only eleven!" broke out on all sides, sometimes in a gruff whisper, sometimes almost in a shriek. Obviously nerves were taut.

Somebody chuckled. Instantly there was a silence, a silence pregnant with suspense, with fear. And no wonder: that chuckle, a sound which should be mirthful was hard, was cold, was cruel. Every fantastic head was turned towards the centre of the table, towards where the leader was sitting. Evidently these men knew whence the sound had come.

The man said no word.

Then out of the awe-struck silence, came a soft melodious voice.

"Tell them, Chief."

He spoke:

"Since it pleases you, my dear."

He got no further.

An hysterical voice abruptly screamed out, almost in triumph.

"It's Number Five! It's Number Five who's missing!"

"Not missing!" The leader spoke sharply. "He is here all right."

He rose to his feet and his silken robe fell in folds to the ground. It was at once obvious that he was enormously tall and powerful too: the black silk stretched sharply down from his shoulders, which were broad with a breadth in keeping with his height.

Suddenly out swept an arm. Every head turned to follow the direction of the pointed finger.

There was a box in the corner of the room.

It was not an ordinary box, but more like a crate, large enough to hold a man, and made of dark wood and solid, of a type frequently to be seen about the wharfs. To those whose attention was now centred on it, it seemed ominous.

"Seven! Three! Bring it here."

The two figures addressed rose at once and moved over to the corner. Between them they carried the box, which was evidently heavy, towards the table.

"Eight! Nine! Lend me a hand. On the table, please."

Two other figures immediately jumped to their feet and the box was lifted on to the table. When this was done the four men resumed their seats at a sign from their chief.

He remained standing and deftly cut the ropes which bound the box. Then using a chisel which he produced from the folds of his robe, he pried open the lid. This he lifted; and turning to each side, he signalled for those grotesque figures to rise.

"Look!" he said. "See what happens to a man who has treachery in his heart. Behold our Five!"

The figures rose and clustered round the box; one only remained seated and not by so much as the smallest movement did the woman betray that she was aware of the gruesome sight that met the eyes of the others. For in that box, crumpled in an unnatural attitude, lay the twisted and naked corpse of a man, horribly mutilated. From just over the heart the bloodstained handle of a knife still stuck out.

The figures gave no sign, made no sound. Perhaps there were one or two sharp intakes of breath, but these passed unnoticed in the general tension. One by one they returned to their seats around the table.

"Ten! Do up that box."

The figure addressed jumped to do as he was bidden. The sound of nails being driven home came almost as a relief to those others sitting round the table. The box was soon closed once more, concealing the horror that lay torn and twisted within it.

"That is what happens to those who go against us," said the central figure evenly as the other resumed his seat. "It came to my knowledge that Five was about to betray us. I took measures to prevent his plan. You have seen the result. A trawler is leaving the docks to-night and heading for the open sea. When she is some hundreds of miles out she will drop this . . . package . . . overboard, after it has been suitably weighted. Five went against us; he just disappears. I am sorry in one way. His skill as a forger was useful. Still, we retain the invaluable service of the Bird of Prey."

He looked towards the man on his right.

"Now, my friends, to business, but one word of warning before we start. You all receive your instructions about the meetings. It is important to be punctual. You know that you are given times at ten minutes' interval. If you are not punctual you may overlap. It is my wish that for your own safety you should not know each other by sight. The reason is obvious. Had Five known who you all were and had I not reached him in time the result might have been disastrous. I know you all but no one else does. Therefore arrive at your appointed times."

He looked about him.

"Now, please, reports first. Eight, what of your investigations?"

Far into the night these weird caricatures of birds of prey sat around the monks' table in solemn conclave, giving reports, making plans, receiving instructions from their chief.

Then, one by one as before, at intervals they rose and left by the way they had come. Only the leader and the woman at last remained.

# CHAPTER II

TO all his subordinates at the Yard, Sir William Blandyce was a very great man. To the general public he was known as a name, but no more, in his capacity of Commissioner of Police. He was tall and slim; he wore his hair, now tinged with grey, brushed straight back from his forehead and was invariably immaculately attired.

Detective-Inspector Tudor stood watching his chief who sat motionless at a great desk, engrossed in a typewritten sheet of foolscap. His expression was intent, yet a faint smile played about his lips. He had himself just perused that paper and had brought it in to Sir William. His smile was not of humour but rather of commiseration, for the information which that message contained could only be disturbing to the Commissioner.

At last the elder man looked up.

"This . . . er . . . seems to bear out our suspicions to a . . . a . . . quite remarkable extent, eh, Tudor?"

"It does, sir."

"Just sent over from the Sûreté, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Straight?"

"No, in code, sir."

"I see."

For a moment he relapsed into silence, a puzzled frown on his forehead. Then:

"Any answers from Berlin or Vienna?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Or from New York?"

"Nor from New York."

"I see. No doubt they're combing out a bit before letting us have a definite answer. But I don't like it. Not one little bit. Do you, Tudor?"

The inspector smiled.

"No, sir. I do not."

His tone was emphatic.

"It looks as if we were in for a very difficult time, a very difficult time indeed."

Sir William spoke evenly but finished with a sudden gust of passion, "Why the hell have these fellows concentrated on us?"

The inspector shifted uneasily from one foot to the other.

"It doesn't follow that they have yet, sir, does it? I mean, signs are pointing to it, but we can't be sure."

"You are taking a very optimistic view, aren't you, Tudor? Particularly in view of . . . this."

He tapped the foolscap in his hand.

The inspector answered boldly.

"Maybe, sir. But you may be taking the pessimistic side, sir."

For a moment the Commissioner stared at his subordinate; then suddenly he laughed.

"Very well, let's see who, on the face of it, is most likely to be right. Run over the facts, Tudor."

"Yes, sir."

The inspector pulled out a notebook from his pocket.

"On the fourth of August, sir . . ."

"Just over a month ago."

"Yes, sir, just over a month ago. On that date, sir, the house of a Mr. Rubenstein was robbed and the owner murdered as he lay asleep in bed. There seemed no reason for the robbery and no motive for the crime, since Mr. Rubenstein was believed to be a poor man and certainly lived in a quiet way. Afterwards, however, sir, it transpired . . ."

"A good word, Tudor!"

"Yes, sir. It transpired that Mr. Rubenstein was a very wealthy man indeed, sir, A miser, sir."

"Yes. Go on."

"Mr. Rubenstein kept all his money in cash in his house. We found out where the hiding place was but the cash was gone. As well, sir, there was no motive for the crime."

"Eh?"

"For the murder. Mr. Rubenstein was killed in cold blood as he lay asleep in bed."

The inspector paused and the Commissioner did not speak. They remained there, the one standing, the other sitting at his desk, apparently lost in thought.

Then, quite suddenly, the inspector continued:

"On the eleventh of August, sir . . ."

"Precisely one week later."

"As you say, sir, precisely one week later, a Mr. Sanderson, well-known as a very rich receiver of stolen goods, goes out of business suddenly."

The Commissioner smiled.

"Involuntarily?"

"Involuntarily, sir. Because of a knife in his heart."

"Quite."

"It so happened that we were on the scene pretty quickly after the murder. We knew that he had a big job on that night and that a valuable consignment of jewellery was due. We raided him in the middle of the night."

"And found?"

"Sanderson with his throat cut from ear to ear and a knife in his heart. No sign of the jewellery."

Again there was a silence between the two men. Then looking down at his notebook the inspector continued:

"On the eighteenth of August, sir . . ."

The Commissioner held up his hand.

"Just one minute, Tudor. The fourth, the eleventh, the eighteenth . . . intervals of a week and all Sundays. Is that so?"

"That's so, sir."

"I was brought up to believe that Sunday was a day of rest and peace," said Sir William dreamily.

"Not for the police, sir," answered the inspector grimly. "As I was saying, on the eighteenth of August a man named Harrison was found dead in a flat in Park Lane."

"Ah!" said the Commissioner. "We are rising in the world."

*"He* never rose again," said Tudor gruffly. "He had just arrived from South America. Like a fool he

had brought over a large quantity of uncut diamonds and he hadn't bothered to bank them or take any precautions for their safety. They went the way of the rest."

"How did he die?"

"Poison."

"How administered?"

"Through the mouth, probably with food."

"What sort of poison?"

"I haven't the slightest idea."

The Commissioner looked up.

"A new sort of poison?"

"No, sir, not quite. Two men have died mysteriously in the last year, obviously murdered, but in neither case was the criminal caught. One died in Vienna, the other in Bucharest. Their bodies were of course examined. The same traces were found as in the case of Harrison."

Slowly, deliberately, the Commissioner leant forward and reached for his cigarette case which lay on the desk. He opened it, took out a cigarette, and then replaced it. The inspector took out a matchbox from his pocket and lighting a match held it for his chief.

Then replacing the box, he cleared his throat.

"On the twenty-fifth of August . . ."

"To-day being the thirtieth?"

"Last Sunday, sir. A woman named Burton, a lady well-known for her great wealth and the wonderful art treasures she had in her house in Grosvenor Square, was found murdered. . . ."

A knock on the door interrupted him. The Commissioner looked up.

"Come in."

A uniformed constable entered and placed a sheet of paper before Sir William, who waited until he had retired before picking it up.

"Ah," he said, "from Vienna!"

He read it through and a frown crossed his good-looking features. Then he passed it over the desk to Tudor.

"Read that!"

The inspector read it, then returned it to the desk.

"Much the same as Paris, sir," he commented.

The Commissioner nodded.

"Well, you were saying about Mrs. Burton?"

"She was found murdered, sir, with the house ransacked. All the valuable furniture which could be moved was gone. She . . ."

But the inspector seemed doomed to interruption. There was another knock on the door and again the constable came in with a sheet of paper. The Commissioner read it through.

"New York reports the same thing," he said irritably. "Dash it all, Tudor, I don't believe in your blasted optimism! Everything is pointing the way we don't want it to . . . everything!"

For a few moments Tudor said nothing, then he continued quietly:

"Mrs. Burton, sir. She was found strangled."

He paused, eyeing his chief. The Commissioner gave no sign. Tudor, knowing that if he had been deemed to have overstepped the mark he would have heard of it, resumed his tale.

"Curious things came to light after her death. Mrs. Burton was not all she had seemed to be in life. We found her true name to be Samuelson and under that name we knew her to have been guilty of many shady dealings in America. Their police had lost sight of her or she would have been extradited years ago. Well, she went with the others, but there was one odd thing about that murder."

"Yes, go on, Inspector."

Evidently the Commissioner had recovered from his moment of ill-temper.

"She was strangled, not with a line or wire, but with the hands."

"Oh, yes?"

"And the hands left marks just like the talons of a vulture."

For a moment he paused.

"Go on, Tudor! You ought to be a serial writer, man! You will keep me hanging in suspense!"

"Sorry, sir."

The inspector looked at his chief and the latter was surprised to see that beads of perspiration had gathered on his subordinate's brow.

"You know, sir, of the Raubvogel?"

"Roughly, in English, the Bird of Prey?"

"Yes sir. A criminal who has been terrorising Berlin for the last few months and who is known by that name."

"The fellow who kidnaps his victims?"

"Choosing only rich people and waiting until an opportunity came when they would not be missed, such as the start of a long journey or a holiday. Then he forged their signatures to cheques, to bills, everything which would drain their wealth quite dry. And when this had come about, their corpses were always found . . . and they had been strangled."

"All of them?"

"All of them. And on each body, at the neck, there were found marks resembling those of the talons of an eagle."

The Commissioner laughed shakily but he also brushed away with his handkerchief the suspicion of dampness round the temples.

"Berlin has not answered yet," he said.

"No, sir."

"Berlin's answer will be very interesting."

"It will decide the matter, sir."

Sir William lit another cigarette.

"Up to date, then, on the last four successive Sundays we have had an unexplained murder around or in London. And from the general nature of the crimes, what do you infer, Inspector?"

Detective-Inspector Tudor shut his notebook and returned it to his pocket. For a moment or two he remained motionless and silent, then he suddenly looked up and met the shrewd eyes of his chief.

"I hate to say it, sir, but I am forced to admit that I believe my optimism is wrong and your pessimism is right."

Sir William smiled. He knew what it had cost Tudor to make this admission.

"Tut, tut, Inspector!" he spoke kindly. "We are not discussing that now. We are still going over the facts. Please tell me what do you infer from the nature of these four murders."

"Yes, sir. Sorry, sir."

For a moment or two Tudor reflected. Then he spoke and his voice held decision.

"The general inference—from the absence of clues, the skill with which each crime was committed, the rapidity in the execution of each robbery and the daring shown every time—is that we are up against either one man or a gang of crooks of great and, if I may say so, unusual intelligence. I personally incline towards the theory that it is a gang, for two reasons. The first, perhaps rather a slender connection, but I really can't help it, sir, I . . . well . . ."

"You have a hunch?"

"That's exactly it, sir. I feel that it is so. The first reason is that I feel all the four murders are the work of the same man. For one thing they've each occurred on a Sunday, and on successive Sundays at that, ever since August the fourth. For another, these murders and robberies, sir, show a knowledge of the past life and present habits of the victims which is to say the least of it suspiciously extensive. Take Rubenstein—a miser and a rich man but nobody knew it; take Sanderson, a receiver but a very superior one and a man we thought to be going straight."

Tudor relapsed into silence, a worried expression on his face.

"And the second reason?" gently prompted Sir William.

"The second reason, sir, is a much more weighty one. I believe we are up against a gang because the murders were committed in such different ways. As you know, sir, a criminal nearly always commits his crimes in the way which he has previously found successful—a strangler strangles, a knifer knifes. I don't know why it should be, but it is so; criminals are seldom versatile. Of these murders two have been done with the knife, one by poison and the most recent by strangulation."

"Yes!" said the Commissioner firmly. "I agree. Taken together, the second indisputable fact, in conjunction with your first theory, they fit. Murders and robberies on every successive Sunday, crimes necessitating a good spying system and three methods of killing. I agree, Tudor, I agree. A gang, Tudor; and a darned powerful gang at that."

"I hope not so powerful as we fear, sir."

"Ah, yes! My pessimism again!" The Commissioner laughed quietly. "Well, go on, Tudor."

The inspector suddenly grinned quite unexpectedly.

"This is the part that I don't like going over, sir!" he laughed. "It makes me feel too much that you are right."

Sir William smiled.

"Out with it, Tudor. Be a man!"

"Well, sir. We've discovered, sir, a peculiar thing about each of the murders. We have. . ."

"Who has?"

"Eh? I beg your pardon, sir. Scotland Yard, sir."

"And who in Scotland Yard?"

"Well . . . I did, sir."

"That's right, Tudor. Take credit where it is due, and give it too; an excellent rule in life. Go on!"

"Well . . . er, I discovered that there was a great resemblance in the methods used by the murderers and the methods used by certain well-known Continental criminals. In the first place, Rubenstein. Rubenstein was killed for no reason whatsoever . . . just out of blood lust as he lay asleep in bed. The robbery had been achieved and Rubenstein had no suspicion. A nasty crime, sir, and one unusual, thank God, in this country. But what about the American Stanton? For the past year he's been terrorizing the western states of that country. Secondly, there's Sanderson. Killed by a knife. But killed twice, if you know what I mean. Throat cut *and* a knife in his heart. Lemoine has been doing that in the Apache quarter of Paris for a year. Then Harrison, sir. Poisoned by the identical but unknown poison used in the cases at Vienna and Bucharest."

Tudor stopped speaking and stood quite still, lost in thought. Sir William Blandyce watched him narrowly, made mental note of the furrowed brow, of the worried expression. Tudor, the invariable optimist, worried, was a sight which did not please the

Commissioner. He frowned. It seemed an ominous portent.

"And finally?"

Tudor pulled himself together with a start.

"Yes, sir. Finally, Mrs. Burton. Strangled, sir, and strangled apparently by an eagle, or at any rate, some monstrosity with eagle's talons instead of hands. My God, sir!" he cried out in sudden passion. "We don't want that fiend—that Raubvogel—over here!"

"Steady, Tudor, steady!" Sir William's suave voice was gently reproving. "I know we don't. But if he's come, it's our job to deal with him, to run him to earth and chase him to the gallows."

"Yes, sir. Quite, sir."

Sir William threw his cigarette stump into the ash-tray on his desk impatiently.

"Now look here, Tudor," he said briskly, "what it comes to is this. We think we are threatened by a wave of crime unparalleled in our history; in fact we are almost certain of it and we are also practically assured that it is emanating from one gang of crooks. You have found a resemblance in these four murders to the foul work of famous Continental criminals; very well, I wired at once to Paris, Vienna, New York and Berlin. The first three have answered."

He picked up three slips of paper from his desk.

"Paris says: 'Lemoine not heard of for a month.' New York reports that Stanton has also disappeared. Vienna states that there have been no cases of poisoning for the last six weeks."

He looked up suddenly.

"It looks bad, Tudor. Ominous, I call it."

In his excitement his subordinate leant forward, one hand on the Commissioner's desk.

"That's the word, sir. Ominous!"

"But we haven't yet heard from Berlin."

"The Raubvogel!"

"Exactly. So far we are inclined towards a belief. If Berlin reports that he also has gone, then it will be almost proof."

For a few moments the men stared into each other's eyes; they were soldiers in arms under the same banner now, working shoulder to shoulder; the difference in rank was forgotten.

"And what will it mean, my friend, if we are right?" The Commissioner's voice was soft, but Tudor heard every word. "It will mean that the most warped brains of the criminal world have come together, that intelligence steeped in cunning and cruelty have combined against the forces of law and order. It will mean that civilisation is threatened, not by isolated cases of criminal activities, but by a gang almost as powerful and experienced as the police forces of the whole world! Ye gods! What a ghastly thing to happen!"

There came a knock at the door. Both men jumped involuntarily, so absorbed had they been in the appalling picture which their imagination had conjured up. The Commissioner had recovered himself quickly, however, and called out to enter.

A uniformed policeman brought in an envelope.

"Berlin!"

Both men breathed rather than spoke the two syllables. The Commissioner took the envelope and signalled the messenger to go. When the door had closed behind him, Sir William split open the envelope with an ivory paper knife which lay at his right hand.

For a moment he stared at the sheet of paper in his hand, almost as if he could not believe what he saw there. Then abruptly his senses returned to him.

"This is not from Berlin!" he cried. "Hi! Johnson!"

The door reopened at once and the policeman reappeared.

"When did this come?"

"Just this minute, sir."

"How?"

"By hand, sir."

"All right."

The man retired.

Slowly, deliberately, Sir William looked down at the letter.

"Come round here, Tudor," he said suddenly, without looking up. "This concerns us all."

The inspector moved round the desk and together they read the letter.

Dear Sir William (it ran),

I trust you will not resent my addressing you in this manner, since I am a perfect stranger to you. But I have studied you so carefully in the last few months that I feel I do know you although we have never been introduced. True, I watched the race for the Gold Cup at Ascot over your shoulder some years ago and from your face afterwards I think you backed the winner as I did; but this does not constitute an introduction in the best circles.

You may by now have turned to my signature in order to see who it is who is writing to you. Although we have never met it is a signature with which you may become almost too familiar for your liking in the near future.

But enough of this chatter! To the purpose of this letter! It is to warn you, Sir William, that I am not here to be tampered with or hindered. Last night one of your men, acting under orders, arranged to meet a police spy, or "nose", as the lower orders of my profession are apt to call them, with a view to being taken to an arranged rendezvous where a renegade member of my gang was to give information about the mysterious death of a certain Mrs. Burton. The traitor has been dealt with, as also the "nose"; I have refrained from interfering with your man, except to confine him for the night. He should be with you shortly and will tell you all about it.

But I must point out that it is quite useless to do this sort of thing. My system of intelligence makes it quite ridiculous for you to hope for success against me by such simple methods; I know all that is going on. And since I know that you suspect the truth let me give it you.

Hitherto a criminal, since he has worked alone, has had little chance of succeeding for long against the resources and experience of the police. On the other hand, were the best brains of the criminal profession to be joined together under one genius of organization—yes, I know my value—the gang thus formed would have at least as great an experience and very nearly as great resources. Since I have a passion for fairness, and also a certain liking for wealth, I have done just this very thing.

We shall never meet, Sir William; but you will know of me, as will the world, very much better in the near future. And if my activities may force you to resignation, be comforted in the thought that your successor will inevitably fail as you yourself will fail in all your efforts to frustrate my plans.

Sincerely yours,

VULTURE.

"Good God!"

The exclamation escaped Sir William Blandyce without his having any knowledge that he had spoken.

"This . . . this . . . this is absurd! Preposterous! It's . . . it's a damn bad jest!"

"I'm afraid not, sir."

Detective-Inspector Tudor's voice, very even, very serious, brought the Commissioner out of his moment of wrathful indignation at once.

"Eh? Why not, Tudor?"

"Because, sir, late last night Inspector Brand was sent out to interview a man named Jones, a receiver who is also a police spy, and he has not yet returned."

"What! Why wasn't I told of this?"

"It is not unusual, as you know, sir, for a police officer to be out on duty for days on end."

"Er . . . yes, of course, I see."

Suddenly the Commissioner looked up from the letter he still held in his hand. He laughed. Evidently he had recovered from his ill humour.

"Ye gods! The fellow's got cheek anyway! I'd like . . ."

He got no further. There came a sharp tap on the door, and without waiting for the usual permission to enter, a man in plain clothes burst into the room. He advanced to the desk and stood to attention.

"Yes, Brand?"

If he felt any anxiety or apprehension about what he was to hear, no sign of it was evident in Sir William's voice as he put the question.

"I went out last night to meet the man, Jones, sir."

He paused.

"Did you meet him?"

Tudor's voice was sharp.

"I met him, all right. But he was sitting propped up against a lamp-post. Dead as a door nail. Knife up to the hilt in his heart."

"Long dead?"

It was the Commissioner who put the question.

"No, sir. Still bleeding."

"What did you do after that?"

"Lost consciousness, sir."

"Eh? What?"

"Hit over the head, sir. Sandbagged, blast it! I beg your pardon, sir."

Sir William smiled.

"That's all right, Brand. I can understand how you must feel. And then?"

"I don't know, sir. I think I must have been drugged. I woke up about two hours ago in a yard by the docks. Felt very ill, sir. Sick. Went round to find out what had happened to Jones's body. It wasn't there. Went to his home. Wasn't there. His wife in hysterics. Came here to report."

There was a moment's pause.

"All right. Go and see the doctor," said Sir William kindly.

"I'm all right, sir. Fit again now."

"Go and see the doctor," said Sir William firmly.

"Very good, sir."

Inspector Brand turned on his heel and went out of the room.

"Allow me to put on my bedside manner. Yes, it was. You may not have noticed it, but it was. Don't look at me like that. I'm not one of your felons."

Sir William laughed.

"All right. It was."

"Ha! That's better. I notice a vacant seat beside you. May I occupy it?"

Sir William smiled.

"I'm afraid there's no rule of the club by which I can prevent you," he remarked.

Robin Murdoch sat himself down next to the Commissioner, but for a moment or two he said nothing. Under pretence of ordering his food he watched his companion covertly. Then suddenly, he turned towards him.

"Why the gathered clouds? Why the threat of storm? Red sky in the morning and all that?"

"Eh?" Sir William looked at his neighbour vacantly. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"On your forehead."

"On my forehead?"

"On your forehead. You may not know it, but you are frowning like a camel that has forgotten to fill up before leaving on a desert trip and has just discovered that the well it saw was a mirage!"

"You are a fool, Robin. Am I frowning?"

"I've just told you so."

"Oh, pressure of work, I suppose."

"The police," said Robin Murdoch to the air about him, "are all very well in their way, but they are so astonishingly secretive. Now, if I'm worried about anything and must keep it to myself, I go immediately to find a nice safe friend with lots of brains whom I can tell it to. That way there are two intelligences on the problem instead of one."

Sir William took no notice.

"If, on the other hand, it is an official secret which I have to keep, then I follow the principles laid down in Foreign Offices, junior member's handbook, for the use of, (black stiff cover, if red vellum extra on father's bill), and tell only my lady friends and a journalist."

"Oh, shut up!" Sir William laughed. "I can't tell you what's worrying me, Robin, old man. It's er . . . not my secret to tell."

"So you *are* worried?"

"I'm worried all right."

Robin Murdoch leant back in his chair.

"Worry," he said, "a process of the brain, much advocated by doctors for reducing purposes. Explains the presence of so many women in business nowadays, for the good of their figures. Cheap and more efficacious than perspiration or electrical contrivances."

"You ought to compile a dictionary," said Sir William drily. "You'd sell one copy, anyway. I'd buy it out of pure kindness of heart, to prevent some other poor fool reading it and getting misled."

"Snappy!" said Robin, with a smile, "has two meanings: (a) clever, sharp, witty; (b) fractious, irritable . . ."

"Damn!"

The exclamation came suddenly.

"Eh?"

"I said 'damn!'" said Sir William Blandyce, "and I meant it. I shall say it again. Damn! There you are. I knew I should find a bug in the salad."

"Well, don't worry. You've probably eaten its offspring already."

The irate Commissioner glared at the young man for a moment without speaking; he struck Robin as being extremely like a bomb which might explode at any minute. Then suddenly he burst out laughing.

"Robin, you're incorrigible! But I thank you! Your nonsense is just what I need this morning!"

"Having a bad day? Felons particularly felonious?"

"Ye gods! They are!"

"Gosh!" said Robin with interest, "are we in for a wave of dastardly crime?"

Sir William Blandyce looked at his young friend for a long minute in silence. When he did speak, his voice was very serious.

"I say it with much reluctance, Robin, but I believe that we are."

"I shall bank it at once."

"Eh?"

"I shall redeem it from dear old Angus MacAllister, of Warren Street, off the Tottenham Court Road, and hand it personally to my bank. It will astonish them. Uusually I have got something of their money rather than they anything of mine."

"What on earth are you talking about?"

"My gold cigarette case. A present from Aunt Amelia before she knew what her nephew was going to turn out like."

The Commissioner smiled.

"It won't be your case they'll be after, Robin, old man. That's what worries me."

"Thanks very much!" The youth grinned. "Another impending apology. Two in point of fact, another to Aunt Amelia."

Suddenly he became serious.

"It's bad, is it?"

"Damn bad."

"Thoroughly awkward, in fact?"

"That," said Sir William, "describes the situation admirably."

He remained silent for a moment.

"Let's smoke," he said suddenly.

"Now, now, now!" said Robin. "You and your knowledge of the club rules! You ought to know we can't smoke in here until two-thirty!"

"Well, let's move, then."

"Allow me," said Robin, "just the time to destroy a piece of cheese and I will be with you."

"Right!" said Blandyce.

He watched his companion covertly for the next few moments without speaking. A plan was formulating in Sir William's mind, a plan which rather staggered him. Accustomed all his life to officialdom, first in the Army and then as Commissioner of Police, his mind was naturally limited by the bounds of official prejudices. One of these, he knew well, was a prejudice against amateur interference. Yet . . .

Robin Murdoch had described the situation which lay before the Commissioner as "thoroughly awkward." Sir William knew that he had accepted the definition, yet he knew well that it was only half the truth. The situation, the threat to the ordinarily peaceful run of life in London, and in England generally for that matter, was a desperately serious one; this self-styled "Vulture", with a gang which included such famous, nay infamous, names as the Raubvogel, Wrede, and Lemoine as his chief lieutenants, could and would be a ghastly scourge on the land unless he were quickly run to earth and destroyed. And that was just the thing which Sir William could not visualise as a practical possibility. He knew the more than efficient methods of his special care, Scotland Yard; he knew the splendid courage and brain of the personnel under him; he knew the inevitable end which in time must come to the Vulture, whomsoever he might be. But his men could not afford to take time. Speed was essential if the whole country, and London in particular, were to be saved from a continuance of the Sunday murders and a general panic.

Sir William toyed with his idea. Was he justified, he wondered, in doing what he had in mind? Was it right that inexperience, which must be allied to youth, should be exposed to such mortal dangers? For the Commissioner knew well enough the dangers to which any man would be exposed who rallied to the banner of law and order against this mysterious gang. To prove this he had the happenings of the night before always in his mind, the murdered "nose", the sandbagged Brand. And he knew full well in addition that Brand had been lucky; it had suited the Vulture to substitute a sandbag for a knife, thrust abruptly from the shadows, in order that Brand's word could be taken in support of his letter; but only in this instance; the next man would go for good.

He looked again at Robin Murdoch, carefree, debonair, the best type of young Englishman. And as he looked he realised that there was yet something lacking in this boy, perchance a sense of responsibility, possibly a true appreciation of values. He asked himself the explanation and this came at once.

Robin Murdoch had been born with a gold spoon in his mouth; he had everything which a kindly providence could give him; enough money, position, health, good looks, wit, a very large share of that elusive quality called charm and no responsibilities. He had left a great public school to go to the University; thereafter he had done no work of any sort. That, of course, was what was wrong; he had nothing to occupy him; he was wasting his life in a silly round of pleasure which even he himself knew to be stupid.

Sir William pondered; would he in reality be doing the boy a good turn by putting him in the way of a job of work, no matter how dangerous?

Robin suddenly looked up from his plate.

"I have now finished," he said. "Let us rise."

He rose to his feet and Sir William did likewise and followed him in silence from the dining room to the smoking room. As he did so he had an opportunity of examining his friend's physical proportions; he noted with approbation the broad shoulders, almost too broad for the slim athletic figure, the long arms, the strong hands. They sat down in a secluded corner and ordered coffee.

As soon as the waiter had provided this and gone, Robin Murdoch turned to the Commissioner.

"Who's for it next Sunday?" he asked.

There was the faintest smile playing about his lips, caused, no doubt, by the expression of complete astonishment which appeared on the face of Sir William Blandyce at his words.

"Eh? What?"

"Who's for it next Sunday?"

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"Murder," said Robin, simply.

Then he laughed outright.

"I have a cousin once removed who is extremely fond of radishes. Sometimes, out of friendship, his best girl gets some for him out of Aunt Amelia's back garden, which is tended by a man who is related by marriage to your between-maid, who listens at keyholes!"

"I. . . . Begad, sir, I haven't got a between-maid!"

"I know you haven't," laughed Robin. "I was only pointing out that things get about."

Sir William paused for a moment.

"What do you know, Robin?"

"That a murder has been committed on each of the last four Sundays."

"But only one—the murder of Mrs. Burton—got into the papers!"

"A lot that doesn't get into the papers is known, Sir William. I don't say known generally, but known to a few."

"You won't tell me?"

"Did you tell me why you were worried?"

Sir William, baffled, fell back on diplomacy.

"But that was official, Robin. It was not my secret to tell."

"Nor is mine."

Sir William laughed.

"Are you setting up as a private detective?" he inquired sarcastically.

Just for a moment Robin hesitated.

"With your permission, sir," he said, "I should like to be your own personal private detective until you run down the Raubvogel."

"Good God!" said Sir William, astounded beyond measure. And then again, "God bless my soul!"

Robin Murdoch drew a letter from his pocket and handed it to the Commissioner.

"Until six o'clock," he said, "I am to be vouchsafed my liberty. Very kind of them, I'm sure. Just read what the Raubvogel or whatnot has to say."

"Great Scott!" said Sir William. And then again, "God bless my soul!"

# CHAPTER IV

DETECTIVE-INSPECTOR TUDOR sat at his desk in the small room adjoining that of the Commissioner. He was waiting for Detective-Inspector Brand, for whom he had sent immediately on receipt of a message from Sir William Blandyce.

He had not long to wait. Brand suddenly made his appearance, no longer dishevelled as he had been that morning, but now spick and span in a brown lounge suit.

"You sent for me?"

"Yes." Tudor grinned. "The Old Man wants us."

Without replying, Brand made as if to go towards the Commissioner's door.

"No. Not in there."

"Where then?"

"At his club."

Brand stared at his colleague. Tudor burst out laughing.

"I thought that would surprise you."

"Social call?"

Tudor, accustomed to his friend's terse method of speaking, understood at once and smiled.

"Scarcely. At least he didn't sound like it on the telephone. He said, 'Hullo! Is that you, Tudor, eh? Speak up, man. It is? Get Brand and bring him round to the club at once. Got that, eh? Be quick.' I daresay he'll stand us a drink, though!"

Brand laughed.

"The Old Man'll do that all right."

Together the two left the building and made their way along the Embankment and up past the Houses of Parliament, towards Sir William's club. They were very silent; they had plenty to occupy their minds. The strange experiences from which Brand had been lucky enough to escape unscathed, coupled with the astonishing letter received by the Commissioner in the morning, provided unlimited food for thought and conjecture.

A few words only passed between them. Just as they left the precincts of the Yard, Brand turned to Tudor.

"Vulture?" he asked.

"I suppose so. He didn't say what he wanted us about."

"Um," said Brand, "should like a go at him. Very much. Very much indeed."

Tudor understood and smiled. That sandbag still rankled.

They walked on in silence. Brand had spoken nothing but the truth; an energetic and efficient detective, he was well used to a rough passage occasionally in his pursuit of crime. But on this occasion his vanity had been wounded and he was furious. To be caught unawares by a sandbag is a thing no detective likes to have happen him. He was inwardly seething and longing for a chance to get his own back.

As they walked along they heard suddenly the sound of half-running footsteps behind them. Brand, always slightly quicker than his colleague to perceive and hear, looked round sharply over his shoulder. Immediately he stopped and laid a hand on Tudor's arm, who came to a standstill also.

"Messenger," said Brand quietly.

Tudor looked and saw that he was right: a messenger from the Yard, with whose face he was familiar, was hurrying towards them and now caught them up.

"Note came by hand just after you left, sir. It was opened by the secretary, who sent me along with it."

Tudor took the note and read it through.

"A change of plans," he said. "I'm afraid we're going to be done out of our drink, old man."

He handed the note to Brand, who read: "Have to change my plans; come at once to my house; take a taxi." The note was written in Sir William's own handwriting, well-known to both of them, and initialled.

"Funny," said Brand.

Tudor looked at his friend in surprise.

"What's funny?"

Brand nodded almost imperceptibly towards the messenger, but Tudor, accustomed to dealing with his friend, caught the slight action and understood.

"All right, Brown. Glad you caught us up. Thanks."

The messenger touched his cap and withdrew along the road the way he had come.

"Very funny."

"Now then," said Tudor irritably. "Don't be so darned mysterious. What's funny?"

"Initials," remarked Brand.

Tudor looked at him.

"There are times," he said, "when you would annoy a saint. What on earth are you getting at?"

"Sir William doesn't initial. He signs."

It was perfectly true and Tudor realised it on the instant. Sir William Blandyce, in all written communications to his subordinates, invariably signed his notes. Tudor racked his brain to find a previous instance of a note only being initialled, but failed to do so.

"Well? What's the significance?" he asked with just a touch of defiance.

"Probably none. But it's funny all the same."

"I suppose," said Tudor, sarcastically, "you think this comes from the Vulture?"

"It might."

"Good heavens, man, you've got suspicion on the brain! Whose writing is this?"

He held out the note which Brand had returned to him.

"Looks like Sir William's."

"It is Sir William's," said Tudor, sharply. "Come along. He'll be annoyed if we delay any longer."

An importuning taxi was just passing and Tudor signalled to it to stop. It came to a standstill at the kerb and after giving Sir William's private address in Knightsbridge to the driver, he got in. Brand remained standing on the pavement.

"Come on. . . ."

Tudor's voice, from within the cab, sounded both impatient and irritated, but Brand answered impassively:

"No, thanks. I'm going on to the club."

"What?"

"You heard."

"Now look here, Brand," said Tudor, leaning out of the cab, "don't be a fool. I tell you you have gone loopy! Suspicion mad! You'll be forcibly retired and spend the rest of your life solving crosswords instead of crimes if you aren't careful."

"Risk that."

"Sir William will be furious."

"Risk that."

"Good God!" said Tudor. "The man's a mule! All right, on your own head be it! Shall I tell Sir William to come round and fetch you personally?"

"Thanks. Should like that."

"You won't!" said Tudor viciously, and slammed the door.

Brand watched the taxi disappearing into the traffic; then he continued briskly on his way.

"Hunch!" he said half aloud, but speaking to himself.

He knew that on the face of it, all that Tudor had said was true, and all that he had called him was applicable, no matter how uncomplimentary. And he smiled to himself at the thought of what Tudor was probably thinking of him at that moment as he was being transported through the traffic towards Knightsbridge. But as he had told himself, Detective-Inspector

Brand had had a hunch, and he knew from past experience that when he had a hunch it ought to be followed to the bitter end. He had good reason for this; to the successful outcome of certain hunches of his had been due his rapid promotion to the position of inspector, which he now held; others had, however, gone agley. Brand was frankly a little nervous, for if this hunch were to prove unfounded, then he knew that all Tudor prophesied with regard to the fury of Sir William Blandyce would be amply verified. The prospect was scarcely peaceful.

He quickened his footsteps. He did not altogether like his hunch. If it were a true one, Tudor was in all probability at that moment being driven into acute danger. He turned into Pall Mall and almost ran up the steps of Sir William's club.

He immediately accosted the hall porter.

"Sir William Blandyce in?"

"No, sir."

"Eh?"

"Sir William has just gone out."

Crestfallen, subdued by the magnitude of this failure, Brand turned to make his way as rapidly as possible to Knightsbridge. Then something in the hall porter's reply struck him.

"Did you say Sir William had just gone out?"

"Yes, sir."

"Just?"

"I beg pardon, sir?"

"Recently?"

"Two minutes ago, sir. I wonder you didn't meet him in the street."

For a few seconds Brand remained motionless, his brain working at express speed. That note had been written on Sir William Blandyce's private note paper, embossed with his Knightsbridge address. It was improbable that Sir William made a habit of carrying about with him a stock of his private note paper, but it was clear that if Sir William had written the note he must have done so at the club, since he had been gone but a few minutes, and if so, then it would certainly have been written on the club note paper.

"Telephone, please," said Detective-Inspector Brand shortly.

He was led at once to the instrument and got through to Scotland Yard.

"Hullo, there," he said, "Brand speaking. Trace Tudor. Find yellow taxi number XL 15238 or 15233. Not sure which. Picked up Tudor in Whitehall to take him to Sir William's house in Knightsbridge a quarter of an hour ago. What? Yes, I'll be back right now."

He rang off and for a few moments paused in the telephone box.

"Queer!" he said; and then with finality, "Damn sight too queer!"

He left the club and walked rapidly down towards Whitehall. He knew all the side streets intimately and used them to advantage in hastening his progress. He did not take a taxi; he knew that it was quicker to do a short distance on foot, taking into account the mass of traffic on the streets. As he walked, his mind was intensely active; Brand in no way liked the situation which was so rapidly unfolding itself. He thanked his Maker that he had a good memory and had made a mental note of the number of Tudor's taxi.

He turned into a little-used side street. He saw a car drawn up by the kerb. At first he paid little attention to it. His mind was occupied in wondering what on earth had induced Sir William Blandyce to leave his club before the arrival of himself and Tudor for whom he had sent. As he thought of Tudor, he gave an involuntary shudder; but the remembrance of that sandbag was green in his memory, and he knew that the next time might be more severe, and the next man a great deal less lucky.

And then, quite suddenly, it occurred to him that the note in Sir William's handwriting had been a forgery, and this he could not doubt after his visit to the club. Then the original message summoning him and Tudor might also have been faked. True, the voice had been Sir William's, or so Tudor had said; but so had the writing on the note been that of Sir William. The only thing that had roused his suspicions was that the note had been initialled, not signed. But there could be no such tangible clue in a voice. Voices over the wire were often slightly distorted, and if it were possible to make such a perfect forgery, so might it be possible to imitate a voice.

Brand stopped and slapped his thigh.

"Got it!" he said happily to himself. "Got it! They wanted"—he knew very well whom he meant by "they"

—"to remove Tudor and myself from active opposition. Though I says it myself, we were too much of a nuisance to the Vulture."

And then, as the full force of his theory struck him:

"Good God! Poor old Tudor!"

Then abruptly there happened under Inspector Brand's nose a thing which put all theories out of his mind, to give place immediately to action. The inspector had now nearly reached the car which he had first subconsciously noticed on entering the street. Suddenly a man darted from this into the open doorway of the house outside which the car was standing.

The man moved so quickly that Brand received no definite impression of his features or of his appearance except that he was dressed in a dark grey suit. The thing which had caught his attention was a glint of something which the man carried in his hand, the glimpse of shining steel as the rays of the afternoon sun were reflected by a blade.

The man carried a knife.

Instantly, and just as the startled Brand came opposite the door, a woman screamed from within the house.

Brand hesitated a second only. In the interval there came the sound of a low, long-drawn-out moan.

Detective-Inspector Brand grinned.

"Criminals flourishing to-day!" he remarked to himself, and dived through the door with astonishing rapidity.

Then oblivion.

For the second time within twenty-four hours Detective-Inspector Brand had succumbed to a sandbag.

## CHAPTER V

SIR WILLIAM BLANDYCE hurried into his office and sat down at his desk. He took a box of cigars from one of the drawers and lit up; then he pressed the bell push on his right hand.

A young girl entered the room.

"Send Tudor to me please, Miss Dale. And Brand also."

For a second or two the girl stared at Sir William.

"I'm afraid there's been some mistake, Sir William," she said. "Inspector Tudor and Inspector Brand both left here some time ago in answer to a telephone summons from you."

"What?"

"Your telephone message from your club. Only a minute or two after that I got your written message and this I sent on by messenger hoping to catch them up. The man did this. He's been back some time and reported that he handed the message to Inspector Tudor personally."

For quite an appreciable space of time Sir William stared at his secretary, wondering whether it were he or she who was mad. Then he pulled himself together with an effort.

"Now look here, Miss Dale. Let's get this straight. You say that you received a telephone message from me?"

"I didn't actually speak, Sir William. Inspector Tudor answered the telephone, sent for Inspector Brand, and they both left at once. Inspector Tudor told me that you had told him to bring Inspector Brand round to your club at once."

"Good God!"

"I beg your pardon, Sir William!"

"Nothing. Then you say you got a message?"

"A written message, Sir William." The girl's voice, as she saw the effect of her words on the Commissioner, became agitated. "A message to say that you had altered your plans and that you wanted the two inspectors to go to your house in Knightsbridge and not to your club. Oh, don't say that you didn't write it!"

"What's that, girl?" Sir William's voice was irritated. "I haven't said anything yet."

He frowned deeply.

The slender figure of Miss Dale stood before him, slightly abashed, waiting for the moment when it would be his pleasure to speak.

Abruptly the Commissioner looked up.

"I have sent no telephone summons, nor written any message," he said shortly. "Kindly trace the call at once and inquire into the circumstances of the arrival of the message."

"Very good, Sir William."

Trim Miss Dale started to leave the room immediately, but Sir William called her back.

"And please, Miss Dale, give instructions that no man who brings a letter or a message is to be allowed to leave the building until I give permission."

"Very good, Sir William."

This time the Commissioner did not recall her and she made her exit and at once set about fulfilling her instructions.

Sir William Blandyce awaited the result of his inquiries as patiently as he could, but he had little hope of any tangible result. He was little surprised when Miss Dale reported that the call had come through from a public telephone box at Piccadilly Circus, and that beyond the fact that the message had been delivered by hand, nothing else was known about it.

"Dash it!" said Sir William to himself. "This is all most disturbing. What can have happened to Tudor and Brand?"

He was soon to know.

Miss Dale reëntered the room.

"I'm very sorry, Sir William, but I forgot to tell you something. Inspector Brand telephoned from your club shortly before you came in this afternoon and gave instructions that a taxi, the number of which he gave, and in which Inspector Tudor had travelled towards your house in Knightsbridge, should be traced. He also said that he was returning at once. The taxi has just been found abandoned in a side street in Shepherd's Bush."

Sir William looked up at his secretary and noticed that she was very pale. But he himself, though anxious, could not resist a smile.

"Trust Brand to get out of it!"

He spoke aloud, although more to himself than to the girl. She, however, took him up at once.

"But, sir, if he were coming straight back here after the call, he should be here now."

This was perfectly true. Sir William frowned ferociously.

"And there's this note, sir."

The Commissioner looked up, surprised. He saw Miss Dale holding out an envelope and mechanically he took it. He looked at it and saw that it was addressed to himself.

"Great heavens, girl, why didn't you give it me before? Did it come by hand?"

"E-er . . . More or less, sir."

"What do you mean by more or less?"

Miss Dale coloured slightly.

"A police constable on duty outside, sir, found it in his pocket. He brought it round here at once when he saw it was for you."

Sir William stared speechless at the girl; then with a wave of his hand he dismissed her. As soon as she was out of the room he slit open the envelope and drew out a sheet of note paper.

Dear Sir William (he read),

I am delighted to be able to allay your anxiety with regard to your two excellent subordinates, Detective-Inspectors Tudor and Brand. They are both held captive by me and are comparatively well. Tudor is suffering from the after-effects of a stiff dose of gas which permeated the taxi from the seat on which he was sitting and rendered him helpless; and Brand has, I understand, a headache. If his complaints are well-founded it is a bad headache, but then you see he has been sandbagged twice within twenty-four hours. That's rather asking for it.

Both of these excellent men were in my way, so I have removed them. They were too good at their jobs. Brand, in fact, was very nearly on my track last night. But I bear them no ill will, provided you behave.

Understand this: they are my hostages. If Scotland Yard interferes with my plans any longer, I will kill them both. I shall not shoot them; that would be too quick. But I will arrange their death so that their agony will be acute. And if they die remember that their blood will be upon your head.

So don't interfere, Sir William. Keep the peace of the country in every other way but leave me severely alone. I am much too powerful for the police of any country to suppress. I have perfected my organisation and now that this is so, I can afford to laugh at any one who rises up against me and hinders me. I shall merely sweep them aside. Don't put yourself in peril of being swept aside, Sir William. It hurts.

Before I finish it might interest you to know how this letter was conveyed to you. Don't blame the constable concerned; my light-fingered emissary was far too skilful to allow him to notice what was happening. This letter was planted in his pocket—I trust that he was not too long in finding it and taking it to you.

At the risk of repetition, what I really mean is: "Leave me alone." If you don't, Tudor and Brand, not to mention certain others, will suffer grievously.

Your sincere adviser,

THE VULTURE.

The Commissioner laid the letter on the table in front of him; absent-mindedly staring into space ahead of him, he felt for and found his case and took a cigarette from it. This he lighted and inhaled the smoke thoughtfully for several minutes.

Sir William Blandyce found his mind in a whirl: he could make neither head nor tail of the matter. He felt a sensation which never before in his long experience as Commissioner of Police could he remember feeling: he felt puny. His power, the power of the great organisation of Scotland Yard—was being flouted at every turn; all that he did, all that he thought of doing, was anticipated always and turned to his disadvantage. Inspectors Tudor and Brand, the two best brains of the Yard, were held hostages against any further action.

"Robin was right!"

The exclamation was spoken aloud, but it is doubtful if Sir William was aware of it. His mind was working at full pressure; he had lost his two right-hand men, but his spirit refused to be cast down. Suddenly, with a gesture that was almost nervous, he pressed the bell on his desk.

Miss Dale made an almost immediate appearance.

"I want my car—at once, please."

"Yes, Sir William."

The girl showed no surprise, although the order was a most unusual one. Very seldom did the Commissioner leave his desk during working hours. Quickly she telephoned down to the doorkeeper and very soon after announced to her chief that the car was waiting.

Sir William rose to his feet.

"I shall be away about an hour," he said. "If I am wanted urgently I can be found at the Home Office."

With that he left the room.

Miss Dale looked after him, looked at the closed door, and a faint smile came to her lips.

"Dear, dear," she said to herself. "The Old Man's very worried. I wonder what's up. More of the Vulture, I suppose!"

Meanwhile Sir William Blandyce was descending the stairs with more speed than dignity and after a few words to his chauffeur he took his seat in the closed car. The journey to the Home Office did not take long. Arrived there, Sir William sent in his card. He was not kept waiting. The messenger came and preceded him to a door through which he was invited to enter.

He was announced.

"Sir William Blandyce."

The Home Secretary rose.

"Good afternoon, Bill."

"Good afternoon, Henry. Sorry to jump in on you like this."

The Home Secretary resumed his seat and pointed to an armchair.

"Not at all. Sit down. What's up?"

"The devil of a lot!"

The Home Secretary pushed a box of cigars across the table.

"Have one. They're very good."

"I'm sure they are; thanks."

"Not at all. Now tell me all about it."

Sir William Blandyce told him all about it and showed him the letters he had received from the Vulture. For some little time the Home Secretary remained without speaking, staring thoughtfully at the letters. Then he looked up.

"Well, Bill. What do we do?"

"It's serious."

"Certainly it's serious."

"Two of my best men gone, Henry."

The Home Secretary nodded.

"And their lives to be forfeit if you continue to do your duty?" he said.

"Yes." The Commissioner smiled and there was a hint of pride in his voice as he continued. "But that could not be allowed to interfere with our activities, of course. I am happy to say that both Tudor and Brand are the last men to value their own skins at the expense of the public good."

"H'm." The Home Secretary frowned. "That's all very well, Bill, but it does hamper you."

"Not a great deal. I'm not sure, in fact, that it doesn't help."

"Help? How on earth do you make that out?"

"Listen."

Gradually, step by step, Sir William unfolded his plan.

"The situation, at least as I see it, is most peculiar, Henry," he said, slowly and deliberately. "This Vulture is no mere boaster—we have had definite proof of that. His first letter stated his aims, which are to organise a band of crooks capable of defeating the best efforts of the police of any one nation. He said, quite truthfully, that hitherto a crook, being alone against a highly trained and experienced police force with unlimited resources, was at a very great disadvantage. He said that a band, gang—call it what you will—of men, composed only of the cleverest crooks of all the nations, with power and money behind it, would be able to fight the police successfully. I am not sure, although I hate to say it, that he is not right."

For a moment there was silence.

"What I don't understand," said the Home Secretary suddenly, "is why he ever told you of the existence of the gang—why he ever wrote those letters."

"That's simple." Sir William laughed. "It's really only another demonstration of his power. He knew —God alone knows how—that we were on his track, that we suspected the truth. When I say 'we' I mean Tudor, Brand and myself. He acknowledged in his second letter that Brand very nearly got on his track. So he realised that there was nothing to be gained by remaining out of the limelight and possibly something to be gained by getting himself well in it, from the point of view of his personal conceit, anyway; he's obviously a vain man, look at the phraseology of his letters alone for proof. Thank God he is—we may get him on that. He may just overreach himself out of his vanity."

"Yes," said the Home Secretary, doubtfully. Then, with decision:

"Well, Bill. What are you going to do?"

Sir William leant forward in his chair, his cigar held in his right hand.

"Henry," he said, "you suggested a few minutes ago that the fact of Tudor and Brand being held hostages by the Vulture would hamper me."

"I did. And you said that, on the contrary, you thought it might help."

The Commissioner smiled at his friend's expression.

"I know, and I meant it. Let me explain. If Scotland Yard continues to do its utmost to lay low this master-criminal—I suppose we must acknowledge him the title, however grudgingly—Tudor and Brand are immediately in dire peril. In fact, I think one might almost say they are doomed men. Because, however carefully we go about it, the Vulture is bound to know—his espionage service seems to be as good if not better than our own. He knew all about Brand's activities and took measures at once to counteract them; and he was sufficiently confident of his own power to release Brand on the first occasion. To release Brand! The best man we've had at the Yard for years and years!"

"I know," said the Home Secretary, soothingly, "I know."

"I've got others, of course," went on Sir William, "men of less ability, but good enough for most jobs all the same. But I'm ready to bet that the Vulture would know of their activities within ten minutes of their starting."

He paused.

"What does that mean?"

"That Tudor and Brand die," said the Home Secretary in an awed voice.

"Yes, but not only that," Sir William was very serious. "Important as that may be, indeed, actually is, to me, that is a side-issue. It is really comparatively unimportant. Don't misunderstand me and think me callous. I am not. In point of fact, I am very fond of Brand indeed. But the important thing is to catch the Vulture and his gang at once and prevent any more of these murders. In short, to protect the public. If this can be done, it must be done, and if to attain this Tudor and Brand have to be sacrificed, they must be sacrificed."

For a long moment the two grey-haired men stared into each other's eyes. The dictum which Sir William Blandyce had just pronounced was indisputably right, but it required a strong man to accept it and carry it through. There was nothing of indecision in Sir William's firm voice as he said the words, but his firmness was by no means echoed in his heart.

The Home Secretary was the first to break the uncomfortable silence.

"Excuse me, Bill, but you were going to explain about not being hampered."

"I am doing so!" Sir William's voice was brisk and businesslike. "I have sketched for you what I think will happen if Scotland Yard acts . . . probable failure for a long time, even if we are ultimately successful, which means, of course, a certain measure of public panic, and also the permanent loss of two really magnificent members of my staff."

"Yes."

"Well, how much better if the Vulture were run to earth without the actual interference of Scotland Yard."

"What!"

This time it was the Home Secretary's turn to sit bolt upright in his chair, an expression of amazement on his face.

"Bill, what on earth are you saying? If Scotland Yard can't run this fiend to his lair, who can?"

Sir William Blandyce was now sitting back in his armchair in a comfortable, almost leisurely, attitude. A faint smile played about his mouth, and a quizzical expression was discernible in his eyes. He watched his friend's bewildered countenance for a few seconds without speaking, almost as if he were enjoying the spectacle.

Then he was again the stern Commissioner of Police.

"The Vulture," he said in a businesslike voice, "is obviously aware of the personal appearance and methods of every member of my staff. He has shown me that by his dealings with Tudor and Brand. How he has come by this knowledge I have no idea, but the fact remains, he has, and we are concerned with facts. Very well, if I put any of my men at the Yard on to his track, the poor fellow is almost foredoomed to failure; his appointment and instructions will be conveyed to the Vulture almost as soon as he himself receives them. I hate to say it, Henry, but I must face it. There is obviously some serious leakage at the Yard."

The Home Secretary was very serious.

"It certainly looks like it," he admitted.

"It is so," said the Commissioner with finality. "Dash it, you don't imagine that I, of all people, would admit such a thing without good reason, do you? Very well, if I give instructions that in order to save Tudor and Brand, the Yard is not to act and if I contrive to make the Vulture understand that I should like to find a channel of communication between himself and me in order to come to some agreement, possibly financial, it seems to me we might induce the swine to drop his guard, if only for a moment."

"H'm," said the Home Secretary, slowly. "I see what you mean. But do you think this master criminal —I use your own description, Bill—would fall for such a booby trap? If his intelligence service is so good . . ."

"It will inform him that there is no trap."

"But if there is one . . . if Scotland Yard does act . . ."

"There will not be one . . . the Yard will not act . . ."

"What!" For the second time the Home Secretary stared in bewilderment at his friend. "Are you mad, Bill? You've got to catch him! Why all these deep-laid plans if you are not going to lay him by the heels as a result of them?"

"Just a minute, Henry." Sir William was smiling. "I haven't finished yet. I am not really advocating mediation with the murderer and his gang . . . but only you and I will know that. The rest of the world will think that I am. I shall act as if I were perfectly serious."

He paused and relighted his cigar which had gone out during this conversation. The Home Secretary watched him as patiently as he could, but finally his curiosity got the better of him.

"For God's sake, speak man!" he cried. "What are you getting at?"

"I'm getting at the Vulture at his one weak spot."

"Which is?"

"Vanity!"

Sir William smiled.

"Listen, Henry. Everything that the man does—the wording of his letters, his whole mental attitude—shows that he has fallen into the dangerous position, for him, of being overconfident. If I flatter this vanity—and the course of action I have just outlined will be calculated to do just that—then he will be more susceptible to an attack from the flank which he will not expect. His attention now is completely focussed on the British Police in general and Scotland Yard in particular, and if he apparently has nothing to fear from either, then I say it is not impossible, indeed, I consider it likely, that he will do something stupid. And then through the one weak spot in the gang we may get him."

"But who's going to get him if he has nothing to fear from you?"

"Not so fast. I'll tell you in a minute. About this one weak spot in his gang. We know several of its members. We know Lemoine, we know Wrede, the

American also, and worst of all, we know the Raubvogel. To the knowledge of the general public, to the knowledge of the police forces of the world, none of these monsters have ever been seen in the flesh. That is what gives the Vulture such confidence—he doesn't care that we know the names of his gang—he knows that none of them has ever been seen and so cannot be traced."

The Home Secretary threw away his cigar end, took a new one and lit it.

"You're very encouraging!" he said.

"As a matter of fact," replied Sir William, "I am. In a position which, on the face of it, is hopeless, I can offer hope."

"Oh, can you?" The Home Secretary laughed mirthlessly. "Well, go on, then, offer it!"

"It's this. I know a thing which only one other person knows, but that person is not the Vulture; I know of two men who have seen the Raubvogel once!"

As he spoke, Sir William had unconsciously lowered his voice, and the Home Secretary had to lean forward to be able to catch his words.

"Yes?" he said in an encouraging whisper. "Who are they?"

"A Frenchman—a well-known secret service agent—and a young Englishman whom you know."

"*I* know him?"

"You know him. Robin Murdoch."

"Great Scott!"

Sir William Blandyce laughed.

"Young Murdoch has worked for the Home Office—for you—on the quiet quite a lot, hasn't he?"

"He has. And darned well, too."

"I know. At least I know now. And to think I thought he was simply wasting his time on a round of pleasures! Ah, well! I suppose that was the impression he meant me to get, and every one else as well. But something happened which made him tell me . . . to-day . . . at lunch."

Sir William paused and the Home Secretary did not hurry him. He knew it was useless to try to hurry his friend; far better to let him tell his story in his own way.

"The Raubvogel wrote a letter to Robin Murdoch. He told him quite frankly that, much as he regretted it, Robin would have to die. But since he had once met him as a friend, he gave him the chance of leaving the country for the period during which the Vulture was operating in it. . . . He gave him a time limit. . . ." Sir William looked at his watch, "which expires in two hours from now. As soon as he got that letter, Robin ran round to the club, where he thought he might find me, and offered his services."

The Home Secretary chuckled.

"Just what Robin would do! The Raubvogel misjudged him badly!"

"He did."

"And have you accepted Robin's help?"

"Not yet. Listen. Robin told me that when . . . er . . . working . . . in Germany a few years ago he had as colleague a Frenchman . . . from the

Sûreté . . . called Deschamps. The pair utilised the services of a certain ruffian whose real name they never knew. He was a traitor to his country, of course. On one occasion he committed a murder—I need scarcely say without their sanction or knowledge. But later—much later—after they had left Germany, the crime was indisputably traced to this man, and it was the first of the Raubvogel murders. The victim was strangled and on his throat were found marks which might have been made by a vulture or at any rate some horrible bird of prey."

"Good God!"

Sir William smiled.

"Yes, Henry, God is good, for He has given us this one link with the Vulture. And, best of all, that sinister individual knows nothing of this. Robin is wandering about casually somewhere outside not very far away, and he and I have arranged a signal, provided you agree to my proposition. It is the best way—it is unsafe for us to be seen together. In the meantime, he has been in touch with Deschamps by telephone to Paris, and I sincerely hope that that eminent detective is already on his way to London. And, with your permission, it is with these two men that I propose to leave the whole investigation. You see the point? The Vulture lulled into a feeling of false security because of the inactivity of the Yard; whereas all the time the only two men in the world who can recognise a member of his gang are working overtime."

Sir William paused and watched his friend closely; so much depended on the Home Secretary's decision.

Finally the latter cleared his throat.

"You are putting forward an extraordinary proposition, Bill."

"To meet extraordinary circumstances."

"Yes, yes, I know. And if the plan works, there will be fireworks and congratulations on all sides. But if it doesn't work. . . . Are we justified in taking the risk? What will the public say? I should think it might bring about the downfall of the Commissioner of Police. Do you care to risk that?"

"Yes. I'll risk that, rather than face what might happen if this Vulture strikes panic into the nation. And I tell you that if Scotland Yard is to act for itself, I can promise nothing. I can see only one chance of success and that is the plan I have described to you."

For a long time the two men remained silent, each deep in his own thoughts.

"This Vulture is a damned nuisance!" suddenly cried the Home Secretary. "As far as I can see, your plan is admirable, if only we had the time. But, judging by his past record, he is pretty certain to commit another burglary with murder next Sunday. Can't you put all your resources forward to prevent that? We can't keep these murders out of the press much longer—and, dash it all, 'The Sunday Murders' make a damned good headline!"

"I know all that," said Sir William, "but I have told you the only plan. We have only this one tiny clue. We must use it. And if my men—the legitimate police—do not act, the task of Deschamps and Robin

Murdoch will be so much more easy. You must see that."

"Look here," said the Home Secretary, suddenly, "you said a few minutes ago, that Robin's time limit expired in two hours?"

Sir William glanced at his watch again.

"In one hour and forty-three minutes," he said.

"If he is in this country then he will be murdered?"

"The Raubvogel will make an attempt to kill him."

"Well, he may succeed. What are you going to do then?"

Sir William grinned.

"I don't think he will succeed," he said, "and anyway, that will be Robin's first opportunity for him and Deschamps to get the swine."

"And Deschamps?"

"And Deschamps. Unless Robin's plans as he outlined them to me at lunch have miscarried, that excellent Frenchman is just about to land at Croydon. He was to have left Paris in a specially chartered fast aeroplane the moment he received Robin's telephone message."

"Oh! Very well!" said the Home Secretary with a shrug of his shoulders. "Have it your own way. Only, Bill, for heaven's sake make no mistake!"

Sir William Blandyce heaved a great sigh of relief.

"Thank you, Henry. I feel I shall succeed."

The Commissioner took his leave; as he crossed the pavement from the Home Office to his waiting car he took a flower which had been adorning his buttonhole and dropped it in the gutter. Then directing his chauffeur to take him back to Scotland Yard, he entered.

For a while Sir William smiled to himself musingly, paying little attention to the passing traffic. Then suddenly his eyes riveted themselves on the back of his chauffeur; surely the fellow had not normally such broad shoulders. All at once Sir William realised that the shoulders were expanding and decreasing under his very eyes. He looked away in horror. Then he saw that the whole car was whirling round. He closed his eyes; he felt that he was pitching forward off his seat.

Sir William Blandyce lost consciousness. The car continued on its way, but in no sense could it have been described as approaching Scotland Yard.

## CHAPTER VI

THE stage door of the Superbus Theatre was thronged. Very young men and some quite old men, resplendent in shining starched linen and glossy silk hats, jostled each other in their endeavours to reach the sergeant behind the glass pane to thrust in their cards, generally accompanied by a bouquet of glorious flowers, or to ask for a meeting with some lady within. Often before had the stage door of the Superbus been the silent witness of just such a spectacle, but never before had it been surrounded with so enthusiastic and animated a crowd.

For the curtain had just fallen on the last act of the first night of a new play, and already directors and booking agencies were running around trying to buy great blocks of seats for months ahead—the play had been a colossal success. Not that this was very surprising, for was not the magic name of Louella starred in front of the theatre in huge flaming electric letters, which changed constantly from gold to silver, from silver to blue, from blue to red, and from red back to gold and so on again through the whole sparkling gamut? Louella alone would have made any play—but with Louella cast as she was now in a part which suited her dark beauty and frail figure to perfection . . . London had gone mad.

A young man, as immaculately clothed as all the rest, but carrying under his arm a brown paper parcel instead of the usual exquisite bouquet, pushed his way through the struggling crowd towards the doorkeeper's box. He passed through the laughing crowd with little ceremony, earning for himself a few good-natured if rather tart remarks, as he forced himself right up to the sergeant's window.

"Good evening, Sergeant."

The doorkeeper looked up.

"Good evening, Mr. Murdoch."

"Did she get my note?"

"Yes, sir. I had it sent up myself, sir, during the interval. Come through, sir."

He made a way for Robin Murdoch through the little door which a burly satellite was holding against the excited crowd, and Robin could scarcely restrain a sigh of relief at finding himself once more with space to breathe comfortably. But it was not merely the great physical comfort which induced this feeling of relief. Robin Murdoch had been very careful of his movements ever since the hour of six had struck that evening; very careful indeed. Somehow, the inside of the Superbus seemed a sort of haven of refuge.

"What did she say?"

"Miss Louella's compliments, sir, and would Mr. Murdoch mind waiting a few minutes after the show until she sends for him."

Rather unexpectedly the old sergeant winked.

"She's got to take a glass with the management, sir. Usual on first nights."

Robin grinned.

"I see. She did understand that I must see her alone?"

"Oh, yes, sir. I made that quite clear."

"Good."

There was a pause.

"A good show, sir. We won't have to walk to Wigan."

Robin looked at the old man in surprise.

"I had no intention of doing so," he said. "What do you mean?"

"Sorry, sir. It's a theatrical expression. What I mean is we've got a wow."

"A wow?"

"Yes, sir, a wow."

"I'm delighted," said Robin. "I had no idea that we had got a wow."

Something in Robin's tone conveyed to the sergeant that he had not been understood.

"It's a good show, sir," he reiterated, "it ought to run."

His voice was touched with pride; any Superbus play was regarded by him as his own particular care.

"Ah! Now I see. Yes, so they tell me."

The sergeant looked up in surprise.

"So they tell you? Weren't you in the theatre, sir?"

"Oh! yes, I was," said Robin, "in a box with a friend."

For a moment or two the sergeant regarded Robin with distrust in his eyes; then he smiled knowingly. He had evidently rejected the possible theories of inebriation and insanity, and looked upon Robin's rather strange remark as an incomprehensible joke on the part of a higher intelligence: Robin, he knew, was a wit.

"Miss Louella's very good in it, sir," he hazarded.

"She could scarcely be else," said Robin.

"Wonderful, she is," said the sergeant, smiling. Here he was on firmer ground. "As pretty as the flowers they send her: makes you laugh or cry just as she wants to."

"I thought you had a wife and sixteen children," said Robin, severely.

"Eh? Six, sir, six. Have a heart, sir!"

Robin laughed.

"That's exactly what Mrs. Sergeant wouldn't say to you! In your job you mustn't have a heart. Ah! What's this!"

A call boy came running down the bare stone stairs beyond which the mysteries of plain boards hold such a fatal attraction for young and middle-aged alike. He smiled at Robin. Evidently the youth was well-known to the staff of the theatre.

"Evening, sir. Miss Louella's ready, sir."

"You know the way up."

It was the sergeant who spoke and it was the old formula. Robin smiled and nodded and at the same time held out his hand to the old man.

"Thank you, indeed, sir. Hope we shall see you round here often during the run."

"Maybe," said Robin, noncommittally.

He ran up the flight of stairs and walked along a passage towards the door at the far end. Everywhere the sound of happy laughter rang in his ears: snatches of song, bursts of merriment, merry girls' voices. Robin smiled to himself. He knew what it meant to these girls that the first night should have been so completely successful; to some perhaps it was the reaction of frayed nerves after weeks of rehearsal, to all it was a definite promise of a steady job, of a period of prosperity and a certain weekly wage.

Robin came to the door which was that of the star's dressing room. He paused for a moment, a half-smile on his face. Then he knocked.

"Come in."

Robin opened the door, passed quickly in and closed it behind him. Then he turned and, as always, was dumfounded by the vision of radiant loveliness who stood smiling before him.

And indeed the girl might well have set racing the pulses of a less ardent lover than Robin Murdoch. Accustomed as she was to success, although not yet twenty, Louella had that all-compelling quality, an ever-living *joie de vivre.* Delighted enthusiasm with the world and all its fun and excitement shone from her laughing eyes as she stepped forward to greet Robin. Flushed with her new success, still in the perfect gown of exquisite turquoise that she had worn for the last act, eyes sparkling, lips a-smile, it would hardly have been possible to have imagined a more bewitching picture of girlhood than Louella presented at that moment to the eyes of the boy who loved her. She was small and dainty, and there was all the world's feminine allure in the vivid, alert young figure. Straight and slim was her carriage, and the set of her elegant little head suggested something of the clean courage of a boy, a camaraderie, an *esprit* that held for Robin a profound appeal that no other woman could offer. Always it seemed to him that this beautiful elfin girl, with her piquant little face and puckish smile, were crying out to him, "You and I are born pals, Robin. You and I can adventure together. Take me with you." He knew well enough her pluck and resource, how in a tight corner she would be simply his pal, gallant and indefatigable as any man, just as he knew that for him amongst women she had no equal. Again and again already she had begged to be allowed to venture with him in his hazardous work, and he realised that none could be so trusted to back him up in danger as Louella, the small idol of a public who thought her all fragile womanhood and who waited even now outside to fête her as a woman should be fêted. But Louella was Louella and to Robin far too precious to be taken by him into danger, even of the slightest. She was so clever, too: not for nothing was she a famous character actress, and many a time had Robin come as now he came to her for help in assuming a disguise. Louella, as no one else, could transform him in a few moments into some rough of the docks, some old buck of the West End, utterly unrecognisable as his handsome athletic self.

To-night Robin wanted to stay; to tell her how incomparably lovely he found her; to praise her success, to own his enslavement, but he had other work to do. Swiftly he flung down the bulky parcel and went towards her, eagerly seizing the outstretched welcoming brown hands.

"My dear!"

Her soft voice held a wealth of welcome. For a few moments these two stared at each other; then, breaking the spell almost as if she was unwilling to do so, Louella drew her visitor to a luxurious couch which stretched from wall to wall at one end of her dressing room.

"That was nice of you, Robin."

She pointed with one finger to a vase filled to overflow with great red roses.

"A poor tribute," said Robin Murdoch, airily. "I suppose you were wonderful as usual and deserved them?"

Louella drew herself up.

"Robin! What do you mean? Weren't you in front?"

"Yes."

"You were? Then you can draw your own conclusions."

"Sorry!" said Robin, "but I can't. You see, I wasn't looking."

"You weren't looking!" The scandalised Louella withdrew her fragile hand from Robin's and stared at him for a moment. "You were in front, I was on the stage, and you weren't looking? The man's gone mad!"

She addressed the last remark to the scarlet roses.

"No, he hasn't," said Robin firmly. "I was in a box."

"You extravagant creature! All alone?"

"No."

"I see," said Louella, with mock severity, "and she was so charming you couldn't take your eyes off her?"

"He's got black hair tinged at the temples with grey," said Robin, "nasty weasel eyes which seem to be boring into your innermost thoughts all the time that he looks at you, a faint suspicion of port about the nose, and a horribly sharp tongue. I'm sure people could shave with it."

Louella threw back her small head and laughed.

"How frightfully attractive! Go on, Robin, who's your friend?"

"A Frenchman," said Robin promptly.

"A Frenchman? Is that all?"

Robin smiled.

"He's got a name," he said. "He's very, very clever; and he's really rather nice."

"I see," said Louella. "I mustn't ask any more?"

"Quite right."

Robin smiled at the lovely girl beside him. For one fleeting moment the temptation to seize her in his arms and crush her frail beauty to him was almost more than he could bear: then, as abruptly, he cast aside all thoughts of her allurements and remembered the object of his visit that evening. Involuntarily his eyes wandered towards the brown paper parcel.

"It is amazing."

Louella spoke almost as if in a dream.

"What's amazing?"

"Everything about you. Who would suspect, for instance, that Robin Murdoch, well-known favourite of society, most eligible of all the bachelors, apparently wasting away his money and his time in one long round of pleasures, should in reality be . . ."

"Stop!"

Robin's voice was almost harsh; Louella, startled, looked at him with wide eyes.

"Robin! Please!"

Robin Murdoch coloured slightly, and released the frail arm which he had almost unconsciously seized in a vise-like grip.

"I'm sorry, dear. But not even here, if you please."

"Robin!" Louella's voice held a faint trace of resentment. "Nobody can possibly hear!"

"Walls have ears." Robin smiled to her. "Similarly carpets have a sense of hearing, and undoubtedly couches have the faculty of discriminating sounds. I'm sorry, Louella: not even here."

For a moment Louella longed to retain her attitude of injured innocence, an attitude which she knew suited her well. But Robin's irrepressible gaiety overcame her. She laughed again.

"Robin, I should love to be angry with you!"

"I know you would," said Robin. "Never mind: some day I'll insult you by asking you to marry me. Then you can go off the deep end as much as you like."

He looked at her as he was speaking, but Louella showed no signs of interest out of the common. She remained, a faint tantalising smile playing about her lips, holding him with her eyes.

"Well, what do you want this time, Robin?"

Robin Murdoch settled himself comfortably in his corner of the couch.

"Louella, that wasn't very well put! Looks as if I was making a convenience of our friendship."

Louella sighed.

"You always do," she said, "and yet I never blame you. I can't think why. But can you tell me a single instance when you have come to this room and not wanted a favour from me?"

Robin smiled.

"I'm never asked."

"What on earth do you mean?" Louella stamped her little foot. "You know perfectly well, Robin, that you are always welcome. Yet you never come, except to ask something. Oh, I know: you're very busy. So are lots of others who find the time. But I'm not annoyed with you, dear: I do wish I were! Well, what is it?"

"I require," said Robin, "to be transformed into a down-and-out. You know: drink-sodden, work-shy, and all the rest of it."

"I see." Louella fixed him with her eyes. "What is it this time, Robin?"

The youth rose to his feet, and without answering moved over to the parcel which he had brought. He untied the string which bound it and drew out its contents.

"Here are the props," he said.

Louella did not move from the couch: not by so much as the faintest flicker of an eyelid did she alter the reclining position in which she was.

"What is it this time, Robin?"

There was more than a hint of obstinacy in her voice. Robin Murdoch held out the suit of rags, spotted with dirt, which the brown paper had concealed.

"You are going to help, aren't you? I'm afraid my cherubic countenance, unless dealt with by your deft fingers, will give rise to suspicion on the part of those who may see me in these clothes."

For a few moments the glorious daintiness which was Louella said no word. Then:

"For the third and last time, what is it, Robin?"

The young man carefully placed the rags on a chair, and resumed his seat beside the girl.

"Louella, dear, you're not your sensible self tonight. Success gone to your head, or are you suffering from indigestion?"

Louella of the Theatre remained silent: but to Robin, watching her covertly, there was noticeable the faintest suggestion of a smile playing around her lips.

"Curiosity killed the cat," went on Robin. "It was bad luck, but it did. Similarly, inquisitiveness incapacitated the hyena, and a prying porcupine was found poisoned. You can't get away from it. It always comes true."

A little ripple of laughter answered him.

"Ah, that's better. May I be turned into a drink-sodden, work-shy, down-and-out, please? I've got to visit the docks."

The girl turned towards him suddenly.

"May I come too?"

For a moment Robin was struck speechless. Louella did not know what she was asking of him, of course. But the idea of this slip of a girl coming with him on a journey from which he might not return, struck him almost as humorous. Then as he looked at her, Robin realised abruptly how much he wanted her to come, how much he wanted her always to be with him. He looked at her straightness and her slimness, at her carriage and her elegance; he knew that Louella, had she been born a boy, could and would have been the best possible companion in danger, but he thanked God that she had not been born a boy.

"Heavens, Louella, how I wish you could!"

"And why can't I, dear?"

The words were spoken pleasantly enough, but there was a touch of steel in the tone of the voice. Robin knew that he was on dangerous ground, and that he must beware.

"Because if anything happened, what would the public—your public—say to me?"

Robin had struck the only possible argument.

"Oh, I know." Louella tossed her little head and lay back on the cushions. "Sometimes I hate it, Robin. Until I love it again. I wonder if you can understand me? I suppose I have a great responsibility—I've never missed a performance in my life—but there are times when I'd like to disappear, with you, on one of your adventures. That's a life for you when you're young!"

Robin Murdoch laughed.

"It isn't always," he said. "I'm not sure that I like it very much now."

"Why not?"

"There's a man after me. More; there's a whole organisation, and a darned powerful one at that!"

"Oh, Robin, do be careful!"

Robin took one of her hands in his.

"You may be quite sure that I shall, dear," he said. "I value my skin far too much to take any unnecessary risks. But you can help, Louella. Disguise me well to-night, my dear. A lot may hang on it."

Louella's mood of rebellion, of obstinacy, had passed. She rose quickly and took Robin to the chair in front of her glass; in this she made him sit. Then, suddenly, she stood back.

"No," she said. "Put on your clothes first. I want to get the idea."

She left him, and Robin quickly changed. When this was done he called her.

Louella returned, and for a moment struggled with herself not to burst out into a shriek of merriment. But then she remembered the words he had spoken such a short time before: "Disguise me well to-night, my dear. A lot may hang on it." Not through her should he fail.

"Sit down."

She pointed to the chair by her dressing table, and Robin obeyed her. Then Louella, famous for her character parts, mistress of the arts of making-up, got to work. She worked silently, busily, for several minutes. Robin said no word but waited patiently, willingly subjecting himself to her deft fingers.

"Will you be in the light at all?"

"Not daylight. Street lamps only."

"Right."

That was all that she said to him during the period of nearly twenty minutes that she took to work the transformation. Then, at last, she stood back and examined her handiwork.

"Oh!" laughed Louella. "You do look loathsome. All right. I'm done."

Robin looked at himself in the glass, and failed utterly to recognise in the figure he saw before him any resemblance to his usual self. He also laughed.

"Well done, my dear!"

Louella curtseyed.

"Thank you, Mr. Murdoch. Anything else I can do for you at any time . . ."

Robin, suddenly rising, took both of her hands in his.

"Some day, Louella darling, I shall ask you to make me for ever happy."

His voice was very low, but the girl caught every word.

"When?" she asked, impertinently.

"When . . . when I can afford to."

Louella laughed.

"You talk of me, Robin, as if I were something you could purchase."

Robin Murdoch stared into her eyes.

"Good God, Louella, you know I didn't mean that!"

The girl smiled.

"Of course I do. And that's just why I said it. Think it out. When shall I see you again, Robin?"

"Very soon, I hope."

"You always say that. Do come soon, darling, and tell me all about this mystery. Have a drink before you go?"

Robin smiled.

"I can't," he said. "I really must fly. Can you send these clothes to my flat?"

She laughed.

"And again risk my reputation? Very well. Good luck, Robin."

"Thank you, dear."

Robin Murdoch raised her hand to his lips; then, pulling his cap well over his eyes, he slouched from the room.

The company were leaving the theatre, but he passed unnoticed. Many scene shifters, in clothes just such as his, were coming and going round and about the stage. Robin pulled open the door by which he had so recently entered.

The sergeant looked up from behind his glass enclosure. Out of the corner of his eye Robin saw him stare in astonishment.

"Here, you!"

Robin paid no attention, but dived into the night.

"What the devil . . ."

Robin could just hear the sergeant's outraged voice.

He laughed to himself; that old friend knew him well: if he failed to recognise him, how much less likely one of the Raubvogel's friends or any of the Vulture's gang.

The thought was comforting.

# CHAPTER VII

ROBIN MURDOCH found himself at last in that network of shabby streets round about the docks which were his objective. Somewhere down here, perhaps not more than a few yards from where he stood, a man who had come to meet Detective-Inspector Brand had been foully done to death: somewhere down here Brand himself had suffered from the none too gentle attentions of a man with a sandbag. So much Robin knew, but very little more; yet he had come down, disguised by the fair hands of Louella so as to be unrecognisable even to his greatest friend, in the hope that something might come of the visit.

Robin had journeyed partly by bus and partly by tube, and on the way he had occupied his leisure by a quick mental examination of the facts as he knew them. Sir William Blandyce had told him of his fears which had now amounted to a certainty, that the country was up against a threat from the criminal classes, greater by far than any which had come before; and apparently one of the chief characters in this muster of the vultures was none other than the Raubvogel himself. Robin smiled to himself but that smile held nothing of mirth; he remembered the glimpse he had once had of this unscrupulous and fierce murderer and the memory was in no way pleasant. The man's thin, hawklike features had engraved themselves upon his mind in a manner which was in a sense a tribute to the villain's personality, for Robin felt inclined to shudder even now after an interval of months.

The Raubvogel had not been a well-known criminal then; only a traitor to his country and an agent in the pay of another. It had been an accident, possibly, that had started him on his life of crime. But as Robin well knew, shortly after that one meeting all the police of Germany had been in full cry in order to run down the infamous murderer known as the Bird of Prey.

And now the Raubvogel was in London, and, as he had justly pointed out to Robin in his letter to him, there was no room for both of them in the same town at the same time. But, for the sake of old times perhaps, the Raubvogel had given him a time limit in which to leave the country: Robin smiled to himself. He had not availed himself of that period of grace, rather had he taken the plunge once and for all on the side of authority.

Robin walked down the dirty, ill-kept street. He had no plan of action in his head: there had been no time in which to think of one, no clue on which to act. But Deschamps, the eminent Frenchman, had suggested that they should visit separately the scene of the one act which was indisputably that of the Vulture; perchance luck would be with them, perchance a glimpse of the man known as Raubvogel might be vouchsafed to them. Failing that supreme piece of luck, something might be picked up which possibly might lead to a discovery. It was a faint hope, but Robin had learnt that faint hopes sometimes turn out trumps. In any case, there was no other method open to them.

Robin slouched along aimlessly; the more he saw of all the district the less he liked it. There were remarkably few people about, but those he saw filled him with disgust. One or two drunkards, one or two women, one or two figures which were nothing more than fleeting shadows as they flitted from one house to another or across the street. Had it not been for the confidence which he possessed in the change in his appearance wrought by Louella's deft hands, the youth would almost have felt in his imagination the burning pain of cold steel in warm flesh.

"Come, come!" said Robin to himself. "Come, come, my lad! Nerves all whatnot? You should have had that drink the darling offered you! Never mind; we'll find a pub in a minute."

But there seemed to be a scarcity even of public houses in that dank district. Robin wandered on from one shabby street to another even more dirty. No sounds came to disturb the stillness of the night except the faint soft rustle of the river as it caressed its grey, stone boundaries. And ever present in his nostrils was the stench of the river dirt and uncleared filth.

"Freeholds going pretty cheap here, I should think!" said Robin to himself.

As he pronounced the words he noticed the woman for the first time.

She was a woman, but that was all that Robin, apparently unnoticing, could say of her with certainty. Her age was questionable, her colouring concealed in the filthy black shawl which she wore loosely over her head. She seemed to be a shadow belonging to the shadows of that fearful slum; her whole appearance was in keeping with this vile quarter. She was standing in a doorway, some way from him, half visible, half not.

Robin paid no attention to her, but moved on. He had no desire to attract attention, none whatever. All that he required was the unsocial tolerance of those others who, dressed as he was himself, were not disguised. He wanted to run with them unostentatiously, to hear what they had to say, to see what he could see. Particularly to see. He longed to catch a glimpse of those hawklike features which, once only, he had seen in Germany.

He moved on to the corner of the street, and turned to his right at random. He continued down this street, evil-looking, badly lighted. He stopped for a moment to strike and shield a match with which to light a cigarette.

He sensed, rather than saw, that he was being followed.

Robin never turned his head: that, he knew, would have been fatal. Instead he walked on for a few yards, and stopped suddenly, turning half-right as if to look into a doorway. But actually he strained his eyes in order to see behind him.

Some thirty yards behind him a shadowy figure, head covered by a shawl of dark colour, lurked against the houses.

Robin, quite involuntarily, shuddered. He had no use for the situation as it stood: he knew that he was in a district infested by crooks, a quarter seldom visited by authority. It was possible that this female was merely curious; that a new face, a new figure, was a phenomenon to be investigated. But he had no wish to be shadowed: it did not fit in with his plans at all. He determined to put his suspicions to the test.

Satisfied that his cigarette was drawing properly, he advanced to the next corner, still retaining his shuffling gait, and hurrying not in the least. Once round it he stopped dead in his tracks, turned sharply, and flattening himself against the wall, waited.

Robin could feel and almost hear the beating of his heart; his breathing sounded unnaturally loud to his nerve-strained ears; he tried not to breathe at all. That wait seemed interminable.

Then, when he judged that the woman had almost reached the corner, he moved swiftly round it himself.

The female gave a small scream. With one quick movement, Robin shot out his hand and caught her arm.

"Wot's the idea?" he said gruffly.

The woman, small already, seemed to shrink perceptibly. She crouched against the wall, straining to be as far away from him as possible. Under the firm grip of his fingers, Robin felt a slender arm.

"Wotyer following me for?" he said aggressively.

"I ain't following yer."

"Ho, yes you are!" Robin strove to make himself as bullying as possible. "Come on! Aht with it! Wot's it all abaht?"

"I ain't following yer. I swear I ain't!"

The woman sounded tearful; Robin grinned to himself in the darkness. He wondered if Louella would have approved of his accent.

And as he did so he loosened for one second his grip on the woman's arm. In a trice she took advantage of his moment of relaxed vigilance: she twisted herself sharply, and the next instant she was free and running for all she was worth down the street.

Robin's first inclination was to rush after her, but he controlled himself. What good would that do? His truculent manner had no doubt served its purpose and frightened the woman off; and now he was satisfied that it was mere curiosity which had tempted her to follow a new face. Far better to move off rapidly in the opposite direction, and hope she would not feel tempted to renew her too personal attention to him.

Robin moved off down the side street in which he had lain in waiting, but although he was still smiling, he involuntarily took out a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his brow. It had been exciting that minute or two while he had waited in ambush. That woman might so easily have been a satellite of the dreaded Raubvogel with a sharp-bladed knife concealed in the folds of her dress!

With a sharp movement Robin suddenly returned the handkerchief to his pocket. He looked furtively all round him, and hastened his footsteps. But he was alone in the dark street.

"Thank God!" Robin was speaking to himself. "Don't do that again, you great boob! That is unless you want to deliver yourself straight into the Vulture's hands. You'd better get rid of the damn thing so that the temptation will no longer be there: handkerchiefs are not commonly used by the inhabitants of this particular locality."

He walked on, and turned another corner. Straight in front of him he saw the shaded lights of a public house.

"For which much thanks," said Robin furtively.

He went up to it, and tried to look in through the windows, but these were covered by dark green blinds on the inside.

"Shall I or shall I not?" mused Robin, standing in front of the door.

A very healthy thirst decided him; although he excused himself in his own mind on the grounds that information was more likely to be picked up inside the place than hanging aimlessly around the streets. But to enter might mean danger. Robin knew that he would be like a fish out of water, and that others would be quick to notice this. He must be very much on the alert, every minute on his guard. Those individuals whom he was up against—the members of the Vulture's gang—would be the very first to take notice of anything unusual in a stranger. And he was at the moment in enemy country. Brand had come down to keep an appointment in this locality; the surroundings were probably infested with the Vulture's spies.

Boldly he pushed open the door.

A strange sight met his eyes. Robin had not expected to see before him a clean wooden bar, with a bright brass foot rest; he had not expected to see rows of polished glasses and vari-coloured bottles in a quarter such as this. But the squalor which confronted him was worse even than he expected.

There was a bar facing him, certainly, but a bar so filthy that it amazed him that any customers should come to such a place as this. In one corner a heap of broken bottles proclaimed that the premises were very seldom cleared. A few roughly shaped wooden tables, interspersed with broken packing cases which served as substitutes, were dotted round the room. The only visible sign of any attempt at cleanliness was the sawdust on the floor; but this had been sprinkled so sparingly that it might just as well never have been put there.

All this Robin took in at one quick glance; then noting a vacant table in a far corner, he slouched over to it and sat down.

A youth in filthy clothes came over to him.

"Pint of bitter," growled Robin.

Without answering, the youth removed himself, to return in a minute or two with the drink. Robin remembered just in time not to tip the fellow, and not to show much silver from his pocket when he paid.

Robin looked around him with interest; a strange and motley crowd were gathered together in this place. For the most part they were seamen of many nationalities: Germans, French, Dutch and a few English. A huge Negro sat in one corner consorting with a little rat of a man whom Robin could not place; next to him two Chinamen sat impassive, the yellow light from the oil lamp intensifying their colour to an almost uncanny degree. Involuntarily Robin shuddered; these were not a type with which it was pleasant to have to deal; but as he did so, he burst into a little ripple of suppressed mirth. He knew that Louella's skill had turned him, outwardly at least, into the image and likeness of those sitting around him. It was up to him inwardly also to assume the character, if he could, but this, as he well knew, was much more easily said than done.

He looked around him from his dark corner, never moving his head, but only his eyes, and keeping his cloth cap pulled down well over his forehead. As unostentatiously as he could, he took stock of his surroundings.

One thing struck him immediately, and that was the uncomfortable, unfriendly air of suspicion about the place. All the frequenters seemed to be divided into little groups: those who knew each other and those who did not, and it seemed to the watching Robin that all of the groups were antagonistic to each other, and watched each other covertly.

A man, who had been sitting at a corner table alone, finished his drink and got up silently but quickly. Robin watched him, expecting to see him leave the place. Instead he walked up to the bar and disappeared through a door which Robin had not previously noticed.

"I wonder what's through there?" asked Robin of himself.

But he had no time to make idle guesses: a thing which struck him as curious, to say the least of it, was happening. Robin had expected to see concealed glances from most of the tables towards the man who had moved: he saw some certainly, but very few. Instead, he realised that the interest of those assembled there was centred chiefly on him. He caught one or two almost open stares.

Robin sensed something hostile in the room: it was an uneasy sensation. Robin began to dislike the place more as every minute passed, and he wished he had never entered it. Yet he determined not to hurry: he would finish his beer and his cigarette, and then leave. There was no point in staying: these men were talking, when they did hold any conversation, in such low tones that it was impossible to overhear anything that was said. And his first glance at these cadaverous, ominous faces all round him had convinced him that his quarry was not present.

Yet, just to make quite sure, Robin once again examined the features of all those around him. He was looking in particular for that curious hawklike nose. It was not present in the company.

But one man did attract Robin's attention. In the corner opposite to him, a corner so dark that at first the fellow had escaped Robin's keen eye, there sat a burly man in a tattered suit of clothes. Whereas the others in that saloon bar were grimy, he was filthy. His eyes Robin could not see because of a check cap pulled down well over them. He stooped preposterously, but even so the width of his shoulders was impressive. A formidable opponent in a rough house, or so Robin thought.

Robin stared meditatively at this awesome fellow. "I wish I could see his handsome countenance," he said to himself, "but it can't be; no, it can't be. Old man Raubvogel never had shoulders like that; he can't have grown them since. Oh, well, I suppose I'd better get back to the streets: wasting time here."

He drained his glass at one gulp. But as he did so he kept his eyes unthinkingly on the great back of the solitary stranger. Then, abruptly, every muscle stiffened.

Robin replaced the glass on the table, but he had to summon all his nerve control to prevent his shaking hand from rattling the glass on the wood. For, as he watched him, he had seen the fellow look directly towards him and deliberately catch his eyes and then crook his finger.

It was an obvious invitation to Robin to join the stranger at his table.

That letter from the Raubvogel—that ominous threat which had promised to Robin his instant extinction were he to be found still in England after six that evening—came to the forefront of his mind so vividly that Robin could almost read it printed before him. Who was this stranger who was attempting to scrape acquaintance with him in such an odd way? For the fellow's actions had not been open; they had been furtive. None other in that room but Robin was intended to see the invitation.

Robin did not like the situation one little bit.

"Hell's bells!" he said to himself. "What does A do now? Retire on all fours or stage countersigns?"

Robin again had no time to consider the matter. There came an interruption. The door leading to the street—the door through which Robin had entered not so very long before—opened and shut quickly and quietly. A figure—nothing much more, for a shawl covered her head and effectively concealed her features—came in, and in a curiously slinking manner sidled to a vacant table just to the left. This table, as were nearly all the others, was in the shadow.

"Help!" said Robin quietly. "Enemy closing in on all sides. Battle imminent. Serve out the rum!"

He spoke jocularly enough, but he was very far from feeling it. He had recognised the figure who had come in at once; he knew that the woman who had followed him in the streets, and whom he thought to have frightened off for good, was now in the same room with him. And the table at which she sat was between him and the door.

"But are they enemies?"

Robin asked himself the question in some perplexity. What on earth was he to think?

He looked across the room again towards the bulky stranger. Instantly the stranger noticed this fact, he repeated his action. There was no longer any possible doubt in Robin's mind that the man was in fact issuing an invitation and that the invitation was intended for him.

Robin grinned, entirely for his own benefit. He had made up his mind: often before a risk taken had proved profitable, and in any case he had complete faith in Louella's skill. The fellow, even were he a satellite of the dreaded Raubvogel, could scarcely know his identity after his treatment under Louella's dainty and deft fingers. Robin rose quietly and moved over to the stranger's table, keeping away from the better illuminated centre of the room and moving round the shadowy sides. As he approached him, Robin found it almost in his heart to wish that this man might be a satellite of the man known in his own country as the Bird of Prey. There might be something to be got out of him.

Without a word the huge stranger made room for Robin at his table. The two stared at each other for a few moments in silence; Robin noticed that there was nothing of the aquiline in the man's nose.

"Wot'll you 'ave?" suddenly and rather unexpectedly remarked the stranger.

His voice was surprisingly soft, had almost a silken quality. Robin replied that a pint of bitter suited him, and the stranger promptly ordered another for himself. When the serving lad had brought the drinks, been paid, and retired, the stranger suddenly grinned.

"Your cockney, she defeat me," he said. *"Mon cher* Murdoch. I am at a complete loss when I attempt to speak her. That is why I say nothings. Lots of nothings."

"Good God!"

The amazed Robin could not withhold the exclamation, but he said it in a low tone, the tone that the Frenchman had used.

"Deschamps! I could never have recognised you!"

"You were not intended to recognise me," he said suavely.

Robin laughed.

"I'll bet I wasn't. But you gave me an awful turn, you know, making overtures to me like that! I thought you were the Raubvogel at first." He paused and looked at the Frenchman critically. "How the great width about the shoulders?"

"Pads," said Deschamps shortly. "Your English tailors they are wonderful."

A disturbing thought had just occurred to Robin, and he scarcely heard the Frenchman's reply to his question. Deschamps, whom, after all, he did not know very well, had recognised him apparently without difficulty. The Raubvogel had seen him once, and if Robin remembered the strangler's features so well from one meeting, it was quite on the cards that he also kept a vivid mental picture of Robin. If that were so . . .

"Deschamps," said Robin quickly but in a very low tone, "how did you recognise me?"

"In everything almost your disguise is beautiful," returned the Frenchman promptly, "in all appearances outward it is perfect. But, my friend, a disguise is useless unless the—how you say?—disguiser also lives the part he is represented to be. Outwardly you are a tramp; inwardly you are still Mr. Murdoch. You have his habits; you light a cigarette careful, you drink a beer daintily, you almost tip the waiter. Bad, is that. Very bad. You forget to spit upon the floor. I do not."

Deschamps was as good as his word.

"I've never been disguised as a tramp before," said Robin humbly; but there was a crumb of comfort in the thought that it was through his own failure to live in his part, and through no fault of Louella's, that he had been discovered.

"Ssh!" suddenly said Deschamps. "No word, no sound. Watch!"

Unostentatiously Robin turned his head and looked in the direction indicated by an almost imperceptible nod on the part of his companion. A man had just entered the saloon, and keeping to the shadows flung by the shades of the solitary oil lamp, he moved swiftly and silently to the bar. A moment later he had disappeared through the mysterious door which had already attracted Robin's attention.

"That is the eighth," said Deschamps quietly, looking at his watch.

"The eighth what?"

"Eighth man."

"Now look here," said Robin quietly, "let's get this clear: and let's start at the beginning. You say that this is the eighth man?"

"One by one," said the Frenchman quietly, "at ten minutes of interval, these men have come in and passed through the bar and through that door. They are not prevented. I myself pretended to be a little tipsy, and tried to go through too: an excuse was made to stop me. It is some gang meeting, that I believe."

"The Vulture's?"

The Frenchman smiled.

"Who does know?" he said.

"What made you come here, anyway?" suddenly asked Robin.

"My friend, we agreed to scour the district of Mr. Brand's sudden headache." Deschamps paused for a moment evidently well pleased with the sentence. "I have a method when I am looking for a particular needle in a haystack. I go to the part of the haystack where there are most needles, and wait for the one I want to come to me. It is much quicker. I look around and what do I see? A pub. The only one for miles. I go in. I sit down. I see without being much seen. The needle I want will come."

Robin smiled. There was a lot of truth in the Frenchman's words.

"And what do we do now?"

"Wait for the needle."

"But what of the scheming gangsters behind that door?"

"I require the Raubvogel. If those men are his, he will come."

Robin laughed.

"I believe you are right!" he said. "Anyway, here's good health to you. What about. . ."

He got no further. The Frenchman stopped him with a gesture and looked at his watch.

"Yes, it is time," he muttered.

Quietly Robin looked round, and instantly held his breath. The woman who had followed him in the street, whom he had seen enter the bar, had now risen and was making for the mysterious door. She moved, as the two men who preceded her had done, rapidly yet keeping to the shadows of the room. A moment later and the door had closed behind her.

"Eight men and one woman," said Deschamps quietly.

"Dash it all," said Robin to himself, "I don't like this one little bit! She must have seen me in here when she entered; I wonder what she thinks I am."

He waited for a moment, uncertain what to do. Then he turned to the Frenchman.

"Deschamps, I'm not sure that this latest development is going to turn out for the very best. In fact, I'm not sure that I think this pub is going to be very healthy for us much longer."

Briefly he told him of the strange activities of the woman outside in the street. Deschamps listened impassively until he had finished.

"If things look not good-looking," he said, "we will go with some speed. But at the moment we will wait."

He looked at his watch again.

"Another five minutes and another is due. Let us hold our patience. The next one, if there is another, may be our needle."

Robin was satisfied. The Frenchman had suggested precisely what he himself wanted to do. Having gone so far already, it seemed a pity to back out now before they had, at any rate, made an attempt to probe the mystery which lay behind that door. For Robin had no doubt that something strange, something sinister almost, was going on in that squalid house. The sly movements of the men drinking there, the strangely furtive passage through the room of those mysterious persons who passed out of sight through the far door, all seemed to him to be screaming out for investigation.

But nevertheless those five minutes seemed an age. The two did not talk; probably, thought Robin, something of the tension which he felt himself was being experienced also by the Frenchman. Robin could not keep his mind from the speculation as to what was going on behind that door, and he wondered whether chance had led them both to the headquarters of the gang. Was it possible that already the words of his friend and chief, Sir William Blandyce, could be coming true? Sir William had said that the Vulture's weakness lay in his conceit; and it was clearly because of his conceit that the Vulture had allowed Detective-Inspector Brand to go free after he had been introduced to a sandbag. That fact had enabled Robin and Deschamps to find a locality in which to start their investigation.

And all this time, as these thoughts chased each other through Robin's brain, he kept a sharp lookout on both doors of that evil-smelling room.

"Just about due."

Deschamps spoke very softly, but Robin heard him. He looked towards the street door again.

At once he noticed a change in the saloon which had escaped him in the suspense of the last few minutes. Most of the customers had gone: only two others besides himself and Deschamps remained; and even as he watched them, the pair rose to leave. The serving boy had disappeared; the scowling barman alone remained, and Robin caught a glance in their direction which said as plainly as if in words that their continued presence was no longer welcome. He looked again towards the door, saw the last couple leave, saw the door close behind them.

Even as it closed it was pushed open from the street side. A man entered.

He was dressed as had been all the others, but there was a difference in him. There was something of a swagger in his walk, something of a bearing which suggested debonair impertinence and which went ill with his unkempt appearance. Whereas others entering that room had kept well to the shadows, the newcomer strode boldly across the room towards the door of mystery, full in the poor light of the single oil lamp. Robin caught sight of his hands; they were grimy, but their grime had been hurriedly applied, of that he was almost certain. Yet Robin found himself fascinated by the long tapering fingers and the pointed nails.

Then Robin looked at the face as the man passed within a few feet of him.

"The Raubvogel!"

Robin scarcely breathed the word. He felt beads of perspiration gather on his brow, was irritated by them and longed to brush them away, but found himself incapable of movement. There could be no error: that aquiline nose was unmistakable, and Robin could see the face perfectly against the light background of the only reasonably lighted portion of the room.

The infamous strangler known as the Bird of Prey passed through the door beside the bar.

Robin looked at the barman. He was leaning up against the wall, impassive, apparently unconscious of the Raubvogel's rapid passage through the room. But his eyes were fixed with a malevolent stare at the table occupied by Robin and Deschamps.

Robin turned towards his companion.

"Deschamps! Did you see him?"

"I did," came the reply immediately. "Without a doubt I did!"

"What are we going to do?"

"Nothing in too much of a hurry."

Deschamps smiled at his young friend.

"They may not all be there yet," he said quietly. "We must wait until another ten minutes have elapsed; then it will be time to move, if move we do."

"But . . . but . . ." Robin almost stammered in his excitement, "those men we have seen passing through the bar must be the Vultures!"

"Without doubt, my friend." Deschamp's voice was quite calm, perfectly even. "But they are now ten. We are two. Guile must be the one ally to make up the difference in numbers, which may be even greater. Let us wait, unless the woman makes us act."

"The woman? How?"

"In the way you suggested not long ago. They may listen to what she says, they may think you a . . . how you say? . . . suspicious character. They may come to look at you and make certain."

"And if they don't?"

"We will not wait for them to come to us—we will go to them. You have perhaps a little pistol?"

Robin grinned and nodded. 'Little pistol' struck him as rather a humorous description of the vicious little automatic which at that moment nestled in his pocket.

"So have I," said the Frenchman complacently.

The succeeding ten minutes seemed the longest through which Robin had ever had to live. The pair never spoke a word, but Robin glanced up once or twice at his companion. Deschamps was sitting quite impassive, no sign of any suppressed excitement on his countenance. Robin admired his self-control, and wondered if the Frenchman was going through the same inward turmoil as he was. At last, however, Deschamps spoke.

"The others have been punctual," he said. "There is no reason for this one to be so late."

"How long is it since the . . . Raubvogel came in?"

"Nearly a quarter of an hour."

"So you think they have all arrived?"

Deschamps grinned.

"I should not be surprised," he said. "Let us investigate."

Robin looked up, and quickly tapped his companion's ankle under the table as a warning. But it was too late. The barman was already standing by their side.

"Investigate wot?" he asked truculently.

"My friend and I," promptly replied Deschamps, "require to investigate the fresh air of the river. It is too hot in here. Can you tell us the best and quickest way?"

The barman looked at them suspiciously; finally, however, he made up his mind.

"Yes. First on right, then second on left. I'll show yer."

He moved to the door, with Deschamps followed by Robin at his heels. Having reached it, he stepped out on to the pavement.

"First on right," he said, pointing, "then . . . what the devil!"

Robin heard no more, for Deschamps had abruptly closed the door and turned the key in the lock.

"Ha!" he said, "that will serve him as he deserves. Now we can investigate. He will not dare call the police—it is too dangerous for him with our friends inside. In advance, my old, in advance?"

He led the way back to the mysterious door, by the bar, and then turned to Robin.

"Shall we just walk through?" he asked.

Robin stared at the man; he admired his entire absence of nerves enormously.

"Why not?" he said quietly.

"Why not?" echoed Deschamps. "There is no other way."

He turned once more to the door and placed his fingers on the handle. Then he turned towards Robin:

"You have the little pistol ready?"

"Firmly grasped in my right hand!" laughed Robin. "Forefinger in position."

"Good. Let us advance."

Deschamps turned the handle and pushed open the door; but even as he did so something hit Robin on the back of the head. A roaring came to his ears and the youth sank to his knees. Then came oblivion.

## CHAPTER VIII

THE long refectory table showed only one vacant place. One by one the weird figures, garbed in long silken robes and wearing hideous masks each made to the likeness of a vulture's head, had entered at regular intervals and taken their seats. Only the centre place remained unfilled.

A figure, slender and slight even in the unattractive and shapeless raiment which hung in loose folds from her neck, rose to her feet. She looked around her, the awesome mask and beak turning sharply from side to side. A hush fell upon the others, who had been chattering between themselves.

"Our leader, the Vulture," she said suddenly in a strangely musical voice, "is unable to be with us this evening. He may turn up a little later: at the moment he is engaged on business not unconnected with next Sunday's little effort. He has deputed me to give you his instructions."

A murmur of assent rose from the others seated round the table.

"Number Eleven, you have a special mission. You will receive instructions from the Vulture himself."

"*Ja*. I have got them already."

"Already?"

"Most!"

"Well, the final confirmation will reach you in plenty of time: that was what I had to tell you."

"Good."

Number Eleven at the far end of the table, rubbed his sleek hands together in silent and horrible anticipations. The others, watching, noticed the long tapering fingers, the clawlike nails.

"For the rest, the object to be achieved next Sunday is the confiscation of the Delawney pearls."

"Ah!"

The sound just came to the speaker's ears, long drawn out and very real for all that. The exclamation from many throats and in many tones, sounded more like an intake of breath, a suggestion of wind in a forest, than anything else; but it was significant and the significance was not lost on the only woman present. Behind her mask she smiled, so that her lips were drawn back over the gums and her teeth parted slightly in ferocious anticipation. This was the biggest *coup* as yet attempted by the Vulture, and if successful the rewards would be the biggest too. There was hunger all round her in the tensely expectant figures as they leant forward the better to hear every word which fell from her lips. Hunger and greed, not physical, but for riches.

"You all know the history of the Delawney pearls. They were taken from an ancient Tibetan monastery where they adorned some statue. They are valued at over a hundred thousand pounds, and the Vulture has found a purchaser who will pay a good price and ask no questions. The ownership of the pearls, which is not above suspicion in the first place owing to the mysterious manner in which they were first obtained, has always brought bad luck to the family which has possessed them: the Vulture is of the opinion that this family should cease to be troubled by this bad luck!"

A ripple of laughter became audible from the nine figures sitting quite still and listening intently to the words of the woman.

"The best way of attaining this end, in the opinion of our chief," went on the suave voice of the standing figure, "is to remove the pearls and the present owner at one and the same time. This man—the present owner—is arriving in England to-morrow night. In London, to be precise. The Vulture has ascertained that his visit is not welcome to the authorities—he is an Indian of some influence and great wealth, but of distinctly disloyal sentiments. He is travelling with a fairly large retinue of Indian servants, and he has taken a house in Belgrave Square for his stay in London. On hearing of this he was offered police protection for his jewellery, or alternatively, should he dislike the idea, he was requested to bank his valuables. He has refused both offer and request, more than a trifle foolishly. He states that his bodyguard of four Indian fighting men is quite sufficient to protect the Delawney pearls and all the rest: he is of course playing into our hands."

One or two of the figures leant back in their chairs; there had been a sharp intake of breath all round the table as the only woman present had pronounced the last words. There was something sinister in the sound, something which seemed to portend evil, and which seemed to imply that those men sitting there, scowling or smiling viciously behind their grotesque masks, looked forward equally to the inevitable bloodshed as to the monetary profit of the adventure before them.

"Our chief has managed to take possession of the house next door. During the course of Saturday, which as you know is to-morrow, numbers One to Eight inclusive will collect together in this house. This, owing to the defection of Five and his subsequent execution, means that there will be eight of you there, counting our leader, quite sufficient for the purpose. You will receive final instructions from the Vulture himself in the house, but the following are the orders with regard to the mustering which I have been instructed to give you."

She paused for a moment to consult a piece of paper which she produced from the folds of her robe.

"One, you will arrive at the house at eight to-morrow night. You will proceed at once to the cellar where you will find food, drink and reading material. By ten past you will have on your mask. Two, you will arrive at ten past eight. As soon as the door is closed you will put on your mask and proceed to the cellar. Three, at half-past eight. You three will be in evening dress as if you were dining at the house. Four, at half-past ten. Six, at ten past eleven. Seven, at half-past eleven. Eight, at midnight, with the car and in chauffeur's uniform. Is that quite clear?"

While she had been speaking, every figure excepting that of Number Eleven who knew already that he was to receive separate instructions, leant forward on the table and listened attentively. A murmur of assent came from them all.

"Let us make quite certain," said the female voice of the standing figure. Quietly she reiterated the numbers and times. Then, raising her tone slightly, she continued:

"I need hardly impress upon you the necessity for punctuality. Your times have been chosen carefully in order to give rise to as little suspicion as possible on the part of any chance watcher or to the inmates of the house next door. And they have been chosen also with a view to enable you to mask and thus prevent any regrettable possibility of any of you seeing the features of any of the others. You have often heard the Vulture speaking on this rule of his, and of its value to you all as a measure of safety—we had an excellent example in the case of the cursed Number Five. Had the Vulture not been able to act with the promptitude with which he did, the wretched man might have kept his appointment with Detective-Inspector Brand, and if he had known your identities, think of the danger in which all of you would have been!"

A low, menacing growl greeted her words.

"So be punctual. The door will be opened to you by me. I know you all, I and your chief, but he will be busy. Therefore I shall admit you. The number of the house in Belgrave Square is on this paper. One, take it and pass it on. When it reaches you Eight, burn it."

She passed the slip of paper to her neighbour. He read the address and passed it on, and the same process was repeated until the slip reached Number Eight. Having read it, the latter lit a match and applied it to the paper. The charred remains he reduced to fragments in his fingers.

"Is everything quite clear?"

"Quite clear!" came back to her from many voices.

"There remains only Number Nine. Nine, you are to stay here, guard and feed the prisoners. You will be relieved in the small hours of Sunday morning."

"Say! That's a long time!"

The hideous mask turned sharply towards the speaker.

"You will stay and guard the prisoners!"

"Yep, I heard."

"And you will stay until you are relieved in the small hours of Sunday morning."

There came no reply. Something in Nine's attitude betokened sullen acquiescence; for a long moment the standing figure stood motionless, facing the end of the table. Then she turned slowly, and the sudden tension was relieved.

"That is all then. Final instructions, as I have said, will be given to you by the Vulture himself when he meets you in the house in Belgrave Square. Six, you will want your knives; the rest of you will come armed in the usual manner. Ah!"

The exclamation was long-drawn-out, and very low. Two figures at the table, two figures who had seen the reason for that exclamation, half rose crouching from their chairs. Some others of the monstrous repellent masks turned abruptly towards the door.

It had been flung open.

Framed in the doorway stood a tall, broad figure draped as all the others from head to foot in black silken robes. On the head was the same hideous mask.

"Ah!"

The single exclamation came from nearly all of them as again they sank into their seats. It was an expression of relief now, of relief after alarm.

"The chief!"

The figure shut the door noiselessly and advanced to the table.

"I have little time now," he said. "Have you received my orders?"

A murmur of assent came from his listeners.

"And you understand everything? There are no questions?"

He waited for a moment, but no one spoke.

"Good. I came to show you this: I thought it would amuse you." With a quick gesture he withdrew a copy of the evening paper and threw it on the table. "Nine, you are looking after the prisoners, aren't you?"

"Sure."

"You will find four instead of three. There has been a most distinguished addition since this morning. Take good care of him, Nine; take good care of him."

"Sure, I will."

Without another word the Vulture left the room to disappear into the darkness beyond. His satellites, all birds of prey, gathered around the newspaper as it was held by the woman. Soon delighted chuckles became audible, and low growls of approbation.

# CHAPTER IX

"YOUR head? He is sore?"

Robin stared blinkingly up at the stars miles and miles above him. He felt cold and bewildered. Slowly, his senses returned to him and the memory of recent incidents began to return to his bemused brain. He realised suddenly that he was lying flat on his back and that the voice which had just spoken came from a large dark shape kneeling at his side.

"Eh? I don't quite . . . Christopher Columbus!"

Robin had lifted himself on to one elbow as he was speaking but now he let himself fall back, closed his eyes, and lay quite still. In a few moments the acute shooting agonies which had seemed to pierce his head died away.

He opened his eyes and grinned rather stupidly.

"He is very sore indeed!" he said to the dark shadow which was Deschamps. "What on earth happened? And d'you mind telling me if those bright things I see above me are the real stars or merely the milky way I so distinctly made a note of a few moments ago?"

"Ssh!"

Deschamps leant forward and spoke in Robin's ear.

"Not so loud, *mon vieux.* All explanations in all good time. At the moment we are not comfortable."

"Not in the least!" remarked Robin. "Send for the ambulance! And ask for one with nice soft springs and plenty of cushions. Don't forget the cushions!"

"Listen!" said Deschamps earnestly in a low voice. "You were knocked on the head."

"Oh, no!" said Robin bitterly, "I can scarcely believe it."

"But I knocked the man who knocked you."

"Good God, you didn't?"

"I did."

"Hard?"

"Very hard."

"Thank you!" said Robin earnestly. "Thank you, old friend."

"Too hard. . . ."

"Not in the least."

*"Taisez-vous.* Be quiet. Yes, too hard I have hit him. He went squealing into the darkness."

"Oh!" said Robin, beginning to understand.

"I got you here."

"Where?"

"Here. Under the wall of a yard. They have not found us . . . yet."

"Ah!" said Robin slowly. "But they are looking for us."

"Certainly."

"Well," said Robin when this had sunk in, "what are we going to do?"

"We can do nothing," replied the Frenchman, "until you can move. I can carry you no further."

For a few moments Robin lay silent and motionless, wondering in his mind whether he would ever be able to move again without the racking pain which shot from one temple to the other on his slightest exertion. But as he lay there, now in full possession once more of his wits and memory, the realisation came to him that their danger was acute and in a large measure was due to him. He determined to test out his head once more.

Very gingerly he again raised himself on one elbow and remained in that position for a few moments. The pain was still with him—still with him to a very large degree; but it was undoubtedly much better. Robin lowered himself gently.

"Deschamps, old friend?" he whispered.

"Yes?"

"I am better."

"Good."

"But I should like a minute or two more. Can we do that?"

"Yes," Deschamps spoke softly, "but as short a time as you can, my old."

There was a short pause; Robin lay still with closed eyes.

"Deschamps."

"Yes."

"Was I sandbagged?"

"Yes, my old. But think not of it."

"I won't. But . . . oh, Brand, how I can sympathise!"

Robin gave himself another minute or two, then for the third time he raised himself a little. The pain was bearable: using one hand to lever himself with, he sat upright. The pain was worse, made him feel a moment of nausea. Robin closed his eyes and gritted his teeth; it passed away.

"I think I might stand up with a spot of luck," he said.

"Good! Let us try!"

Gently Deschamps placed his hands under Robin's arms and helped him to his feet. Then, standing near, he disengaged them.

Robin swayed ominously, and leant against the wall.

*"Un peu de vertige,"* remarked Deschamps. "It will be better soon."

"It is better now," said Robin.

"Good. How do you feel?"

"I have a fair-sized headache, and my legs don't really belong to me. You know the sort of thing? But they're coming back."

"Ah! I have it."

Robin looked at his friend, and found that now he could just make out that he was smiling in the darkness.

"You shall be drunk!" said Deschamps delightedly.

"Splendid!" said Robin. "Got a nice big flask on you?"

"Not really," said Deschamps earnestly. "But you shall be pretending drunk. That will cover the unsteadiness in your legs. I shall be your friend taking you home. I shall be drunk too but not very."

"That," said Robin quietly, "is a very nice idea. For without your help, old fellow, I doubt whether I could walk so very far."

"And I am quite sure you could not. Are you ready? Or would you like another minute?"

Robin hesitated.

"Could you do another minute?" he asked.

"Yes," said Deschamps curtly, "I will go and see the coast."

For a moment Robin failed to understand him: then, as Deschamps moved to the door of the small yard in which they were, he realised his intention. Very carefully, very silently, the Frenchman opened the door and looked out up and down the street on to which it opened. Then, turning towards Robin, he beckoned to him.

Rather unsteadily the youth crept along the wall towards his friend.

"Now, boldness! You are very drunk. Do not forget you are very drunk."

"I wish I were!" murmured Robin. "Then this headache could be put off till to-morrow."

They stepped through the door into the street, arm in arm. It was very soon obvious to Robin that there was little need for him to simulate insobriety: he could not have walked straight for any distance by himself. The pair ambled along, swaying slightly from side to side; but all the time Deschamps supported Robin firmly, and they made good progress.

They saw only one man in the first half-mile. But if he were looking for them, if he were one of the Vulture's followers he gave no sign of recognition as he passed them. It was very late, and the inhabitants of the unsavoury district were either asleep or about their unlawful purposes.

By degrees the district changed in character. They began to reach more civilised houses, better streets. And with this change in environment came a great change to Robin, probably because of the clean night air. He found himself able to walk alone now, and to walk quite straight. His head still hurt him, but not nearly with so much vigour as before. The feeling of nausea had entirely gone, and with its departure there came to the youth a great curiosity and a true realisation of what he owed to Deschamps. How on earth had the Frenchman contrived their escape, handicapped as he had been by Robin's unconscious body?

They got a lift a little later on a passing lorry, which was making for the West End, and an hour or so after starting out found themselves in Piccadilly.

"Our clothes are not just right," said Deschamps with a smile. "Look! That policeman does not like the look of us."

"I'm not surprised!" grinned Robin. "We aren't too pretty at the moment."

He paused.

"What about it, Deschamps? We ought to have a talk, you know."

"We have got to have a talk."

"Well, we can't at my flat anyway," said Robin shortly, "I'm not going near the place until both the Raubvogel and Vulture are laid low."

"Both?"

"If they are one and the same, until that one and the same is safely behind prison bars. I've got to make myself pretty scarce, old friend, and work in the shadows. If they do get me or you—but thank God they don't ever suspect your presence in London—well, I'm afraid I shouldn't be popular! Remember, we are the only two people in the country who can identify the Raubvogel."

"I have not forgotten."

"Where shall we chat?"

"Where do you sleep to-night?" asked Deschamps.

"At my club. I shall cause a sensation to the night staff, but I can't help that. Anyway, they're all good friends of mine, and it's probably the safest place. Are you going to your hotel?"

"Yes."

"What about there?"

Deschamps hesitated for a moment.

"I think not, my old," he said suddenly, "I am giving enough interest as it is; I do not wish to become the subject of too much conversation. Another tramp . . . they will talk."

"Yes," said Robin slowly, "you're right."

For a moment or two they stood in silence; then:

"Good Lord!" laughed Robin. "What mutts we are! Why, here of course, keeping in full view of that policeman! We'll walk up and down and chat quietly, and no harm can come to us. There's nobody about to overhear."

"Ah!" laughed Deschamps. "Quite right. We are the mutts!"

"Well," said Robin. "Fire away! I want to hear all about it; I suspect that I owe you a most heartfelt vote of thanks, which I shall be pleased to second as well. Fire away!"

They talked, walking up and down the pavement to the undisguised astonishment and suspicious interest of the representative of the law.

Deschamps, quite simply, told his tale. It appeared that just as he opened the door, he sensed some hostile personality behind them and looked round. He was just in time to see the figure of the landlord, whom they had thought to have successfully locked out in the street, strike Robin viciously with a sandbag. Whereupon, over the prostrate body of Robin, he had leapt upon the fellow and struck him with all his might. On recounting this incident, Deschamps rubbed his closed fist with meditative pleasure. The man had gone down heavily, and Deschamps had stood back thinking that he would cause no more inconvenience. He had turned to look at Robin, and had been suddenly sent flying by the rush of the recovered landlord who had headed straight through the door and across a small parlour, disappearing through another door beyond. His object had been only too clear; Deschamps had picked up the unconscious Robin in his arms and rushed with him into the street. There was no one about; the Frenchman had turned at random to his right, and proceeding as fast as possible had seen an open door leading to a disused yard at just about the time when he had reached the finish of his strength. Into this he had darted, and closed the door behind him.

Then had started a nerve-racking vigil whilst Robin lay unconscious by the wall. His anticipation of the probable actions of the landlord had been amply justified: he had heard men passing hurriedly in the street beyond the door. But good luck had been with them, and the yard itself had remained unmolested. Yet, by peeping through a crack, he had recognised in those who had hurriedly passed by, some of the men who had made a furtive passage through the saloon and through the mysterious door beyond. Some of the Vulture's gang, in fact.

"The rest you know," concluded Deschamps. "We have escaped them. But, the next time we must make no mistake. We were lucky; we may not be lucky a second time."

There was silence for a few moments.

"I am inclined to think, old fellow," suddenly said Robin, "that not only should I propose and second that vote of thanks; I should carry it unanimously as well. In fact, with acclamation. God only knows where I should be now if it hadn't been for you."

"In heaven," said Deschamps shortly.

"Thanks again," said Robin with a gay infectious laugh. "Thanks awfully."

"Let us talk no more about it," remarked Deschamps. "But let us consider what we should do now."

"There's one obvious thing to do," replied Robin quietly, "I must report every detail of the evening's entertainment to Sir William."

"Sir William?"

"Blandyce. The Commissioner."

"Ah! Of course."

"But there's no violent hurry. Not until the morning, I mean. No use in disturbing him from his beauty sleep to-night; none whatever. The meeting of the Vultures has broken up long ago, but I must confess that a watch on that pub for the next meeting, and a sudden raid when it does take place, rather appeals to me."

"No use," said Deschamps shortly.

"No use?"

"None. At least not yet. We have more work to do still, my old."

Robin looked at the Frenchman.

"How so?" he asked. *"Comment ça? Ich spreche nicht Deutsch."*

Deschamps laughed.

"Quite simple. It is no use making a raid which is not sure of success. If unsuccessful, all that we do is to frighten the Vulture and his people. And unsuccessful we shall be if we do not know the geographical of the place. Supposing we arrive with our raid at one door while the Vultures leave by another? *Non,* never of the life! They would scatter, and hold furtive meetings elsewhere. No, we would then lose them and have to find them all over again. First, before any raid, we must find the exact meeting place, and whether there is a way of escape as well as a way to enter. If not, we can raid; if yes, then we must block the escape too. That is sense."

"That most certainly is sense," remarked Robin, a trifle overcome by the other's sagacity.

"Good. We are agreed then?"

"Ye-es," said Robin doubtfully. "In theory, yes. But I think you've forgotten rather an important point. To-day is Friday; strictly speaking Saturday, since it is after midnight. But—well, you know the partiality of these johnnies for performance of a pleasant little robbery with violence every Sunday. What are we going to do about that?"

"Nothings."

"Eh?"

"Nothings."

"Oh, er, nothings. I see. But . . ."

"No," said Deschamps quietly, "If we have the time, which we will not have the time, we could do our investigations before next Sunday. But, even if we do our investigations, which we cannot do so quickly without the act of God, there will probably be no more meeting until next week. To-night was probably to arrange for Sunday. You see? We can do nothings."

The argument, albeit quaintly worded, was eminently sound and Robin realised it.

"Nothings," he repeated vacantly.

"Nothings," said Deschamps with finality.

"No, I mean, yes. I see," said Robin. "Nothings, except get the merry lads in blue to keep their eyes skinned."

Deschamps looked at him in some bewilderment.

"The navy? You are going to summon the navy?"

"Eh? Oh, no; nothings of the sort," Robin grinned. "It's a colloquial expression, and means that we should imbue the police with a spirit of watchfulness. Make them keep on their guard. Remind them of their early youth and bid them be prepared to do a good turn to whomsoever may be the next on the rota."

"Ah, I see."

Robin suspected that his companion did not see, but it did not matter very much. He agreed with Deschamps; an unsuccessful raid would be worse than useless, since it would warn the Vulture that his lair was known to the authorities. Their activities of that evening might even bring about this regrettable result, but it was hardly likely. Their movements would probably be put down to the curiosity of a pair of inferior crooks, particularly since no police activities would result therefrom. Obviously it was the job of Robin and Deschamps to prepare the way for an ultimately successful raid, to find out the means of retreat which the Vultures had prepared against frontal attack, to devise some method of blocking them.

"Well, do we go down, to-morrow? I must say the beer in that pub was quite good."

Deschamps laughed.

"Good. I like the spirit."

"Not the beer?"

"Your spirit," said Deschamps quietly. "It is the right idea, when you have been knocked on the head, to want to go back and get rid of your knock on some one else. I am pleased. It is good."

"It is nothings," said Robin. "Oh, I'm sorry; it slipped out. I mean I'm longing to get back at them."

"We will do so. But not now. Strength and a cool nerve do we require. To bed! Let us go to bed and sleep on it."

"And then discuss it in the morning?"

"And then discuss it in the morning. You will first ring up your Sir Commissioner Blandyce. He may be able to help. Then we will meet—in the Park. We will walk and talk. We will make our plan. We have done a great deal to-night! We have seen the Raubvogel—we have found the lair of the Vultures!"

"Yes, we have."

It was quite true. Robin pondered over it for a moment; they had experienced a great deal of luck tempered with a little ill luck at the end. But, although as Deschamps had pointed out only too truly there remained a lot to be done still, there seemed to be no reason why the achievements of that evening should not lead to ultimate success a great deal sooner than Robin in his most sanguine moments had dared to hope.

"Well, old lad," said Robin quietly, "I think you're right. A spot of shut-eye. At eleven in the morning then, in Hyde Park. Where shall we meet?"

"The statue of Peter Pan."

"That's Kensington Gardens. Still, it doesn't matter."

"At eleven then?"

"At eleven."

"Good night, my old!"

"Good night, old friend. And many, many thanks."

Deschamps made a deprecating noise in his throat which sounded rather like a nervous laugh. Robin gripped his hand, and then made off down Piccadilly towards his club. The policeman, whose suspicions had reached fever heat, breathed a sigh of relief and went about his business.

The arrival of a much beslimed tramp at the portals of Robin's fashionable club did, as he had expected, cause something of a sensation. But it was nothing to the quaint mixture of injured pride and fury with which the tramp's claims to membership were received. However, Robin finally overcame the prejudice which his clothes and general filth had evoked, and having removed the make-up from his face was at last recognised.

The hall porter then became polite assistance itself, anxious to undo the effect of the rather strong language he had so recently used to one of the most respected members. Robin could not help laughing at this change of front after the very natural mistake.

"Got a vacant room, Adams?"

"Yes, sir," replied the hall porter.

"A nice one?"

"It has a bathroom, sir."

"And I need a bath. Yes, I know I do. But first I want a nice strong brandy and soda."

"Very good, sir. Where shall I bring it?"

"Anybody about?"

"No, sir. Every one staying in the club is already in."

"Good. Bring it to the smoking room."

Robin lit a cigarette and moved off to the smoking room. He sank down with a sigh of relief into an easy-chair, and stretched his legs out so that his heels rested on another. Half closing his eyes, he reviewed the events of the evening.

He had been lucky, devilishly lucky. Had it not been for the Frenchman's gallantry he might at this moment have been lying trussed up, prisoner in some unused riverside cellar. Worse still, he might have been, as Deschamps politely put it, in heaven. Robin shuddered involuntarily. But a great deal had been achieved, far more than he had expected; the Vulture's lair was known to them, or at any rate if not his lair the meeting place of his gang, and much might be made of this information. But Deschamps was right: too hasty action would be fatal; it was necessary, before any raid could be considered, to block up all ways of egress and escape. The Vulture and his satellites must be caught like rats in a trap. The Vulture and Raubvogel? Or the Vulture and the Raubvogel?

Adams brought Robin his drink, and cut short his meditations. As he consumed the reviving spirit, Robin idly put out his hand and took up an evening paper which lay on the table beside his chair. He turned to the front page.

Robin sat up with a jerk, and placed his glass on the table. In glaring type, a huge headline flared at him:

COMMISSIONER OF POLICE KIDNAPPED! UNPARALLELED OUTRAGE!

Very quietly Robin placed the paper on his knee, finished his drink, and then leaning forward in his chair, perused the sheet.

Late this afternoon the following letter was delivered to our offices. While the amazing contents must be taken with a grain of salt by our readers, the fact remains that upon inquiry it was found that Sir William Blandyce was not at his house, his club, or at New Scotland Yard. His last known action was to leave the Home Office having called on the Home Secretary at about four-thirty this afternoon. He was expected back at Scotland Yard by five, but made no appearance. He had a dining engagement at eight o'clock, but he neither turned up at his house to dress, nor did he keep the engagement in his ordinary clothes. He has, in fact, disappeared, and so has his car.

The letter was delivered to us by hand, is typewritten, and runs as follows:

To the Editor of the *Evening Echo.*

Sir,

I have a message for your readers. I desire to allay the anxiety which they may feel for Sir William Blandyce, Commissioner of Police, when they come to know that he has been kidnapped. I have kidnapped him, and provided my inflexible will is not opposed, he will come to no harm.

I had better introduce myself. Sir William has very carefully kept my name and activities out of the papers up to now, but I think I should have the publicity which is my due. I have collected together the best brains which the world of crime can boast of, irrespective of the men's nationality, into one society. I have done this because hitherto these men have worked at great odds adverse to their success, and it seemed to me that such a situation was unfair. But banded together as they are now under an organising genius such as myself, pledged to instant and blind obedience to my commands, we are a match for any police force of the world.

Am I making an extravagant claim? I think not. On the last four successive Sundays we have performed entirely successful exploits. Any of your readers who may live near the scenes of our activities will know to what "unexplained mysteries" I refer, although the details have been kept from the general public. Another little effort is planned for Sunday next. There will be others on other Sundays until I decide that London has run dry, and move further afield.

I am not pestering the many; only the few who have something which I require. With regard to Sir William Blandyce, I required him as a hostage, and so I took him. He will be quite safe until one of my men is wounded; if that happens he will be wounded in exactly the same manner. If one of my men is killed, he will be killed.

I would suggest to the police that if they value their Commissioner's safety, they should leave me and mine severely alone.

I have the honour to be, sir,

Yours, etc.,

THE VULTURE.

Robin dropped the paper through nerveless fingers. What a ghastly happening! It was a clever idea, as Robin at once conceded in his own mind, but what a bombshell to drop on the British public, a public up to then blissfully unaware even of the existence of the Vulture or of the terrible threat which hung over every home!

His hands shaking slightly from the shock, Robin leant forward to pick up the paper. As he did so he noticed the Stop Press column, and extra large type again caught his eye:

KIDNAPPED COMMISSIONER. SIR WILLIAM BLANDYCE'S CAR HAS JUST BEEN FOUND ABANDONED AND WRECKED IN ST. JOHN'S WOOD.

"Good God!"

Then for one mad moment, Robin leant back his head and laughed. The Vulture, whatever else he might be, could never be accused of any lack of enterprise and impertinence, and Robin could not but admire the amazing successes which the man had already achieved. To kidnap a Commissioner of Police was surely an unparalleled feat!

"Ye gods!" he cried. "What a fellow! What a man!"

And then as an afterthought:

"I suppose old Deschamps would say it was nothings!"

# CHAPTER X

THE telephone bell by Robin's bedside rang insistently.

Robin opened one eye, and then the other.

"There is a great deal of noise," he said to his still sleep-bemused brain. Then he closed his eyes firmly.

The telephone bell ceased not one jot in its reverberating efforts. Robin opened both his eyes widely.

"Fire!" he remarked.

But this time the bell served its purpose, and abruptly all thought of further sleep ceased and a full recollection of the events of the night before came to Robin. He sat up in bed, and lifted the receiver from its hook.

"Hello?"

"Is that Mr. Murdoch?"

"It is."

"Ah! This is Deschamps."

"Good morning, old chap."

"Good morning. The head, he is better?"

Robin waggled his head from side to side sharply in a meditative manner before answering.

"The head, he is recovered. There is a tender spot at the back thereof, but no matter."

Robin grinned to himself; he had very nearly said: "It is nothings!"

"Good. Have you seen the paper?"

"Not this morning," said Robin quietly, "but I saw one last night which put me clean off my brandy and soda."

"Eh?"

"Not noticeably. I mean I finished it, but I didn't relish it as I should have. You mean Sir William Blandyce?"

"Not only Sir Commissioner, but also Inspectors Tudor and Brand."

"Yes," Robin spoke thoughtfully. "When I saw the paper last night, shortly after leaving you, I at once rang up the Yard. They told me about Brand and Tudor. It's a bad show, old friend. The Commissioner and the two best brains of the Yard gone in one fell swoop. He certainly knows his business, does that Vulture."

"Are we then in complete charge?"

Robin hesitated.

"It looks extremely like it. There was nothing I could do last night of course. So I went to bed and here I am still. As soon as I'm up, however, I've got to find out who I'm responsible to."

"Do you do that before we meet or after?"

"I think before, don't you? Then, knowing the support which we can count on, we can really get going to formulate a plan."

"Agreed," said Deschamps. "We said we'd meet at eleven. It is now nearly half-past eight. Does that give you time?"

"Well," Robin replied doubtfully, "make it eleven-thirty for safety."

"At the statue of Peter Pan."

"At the lad's statue."

*"Bien!"*

Robin replaced the receiver. He was now wide awake, and he felt surprisingly well in view of the very severe treatment which had been meted out to him on the previous evening. He jumped out of bed, and realised suddenly that instead of his usual suit of pyjamas he was clad only in a shirt.

"Gosh!" he remarked. "What about clothes?"

He had none, of course, excepting those rags in which he had made his invasion of the club in the early hours of that morning. Robin strode over to the fireplace and rang the bell; very shortly a valet appeared and Robin gave instructions that an outfit of clothing should be sent for to his flat. While waiting for this to arrive, the youth bathed and shaved himself with a borrowed razor, and it was not very long after nine when he came down to the breakfast table.

Robin did himself well: a lot had happened since his last meal and he was definitely hungry. But all the time that he was refreshing and heartening himself physically, his active brain was turning over the situation as it now stood and trying to decide on a course of action. But it was bewildering work; so much had happened in so short a time.

Two definite facts stood out above all others, the first the great necessity for speed, the second the advantage which Robin and Deschamps certainly possessed over the Vulture in that this fiend could not know of their presence in the dockyard public house the night before and of their recognition of the Raubvogel. Again, the fact that Deschamps was in London, actively opposed to him, was not known to the Vulture, and this was certainly a great advantage. But against that the awesome fact remained that Scotland Yard was virtually useless, tied hand and foot by the clever machinations of this master criminal and that Robin and the Frenchman must work quite alone.

Robin grinned to himself and inserted the starboard quarter of a sausage into his mouth. Adventure such as this, despite his experience in the pay of the Foreign Office, had not come to him before. It pleased him, albeit it worried him as well; too much hung in the balance for it to be the impersonal battle which he had hoped for. There was no disguising the fact that the plight of Sir William Blandyce and Inspectors Tudor and Brand was indeed desperate. Their captor had shown himself unscrupulous and merciless, and in one sense a man of his word; if things did become uncomfortable, then he would not hesitate to carry out his threats on his prisoners powerless to resist.

This thought made Robin realise with threefold force the truth of the argument which Deschamps had offered on the previous evening. All possible speed was essential, but a too hasty rush into the fray would certainly be worse than useless. If the Vultures got away after a raid, if their leader himself escaped his pursuers, then the doom of his prisoners would be sealed. And more than that, he would take added precautions afterwards, which would mean that the chase would have to be renewed from the beginning with far less chance of success.

Robin looked up suddenly. So absorbed had he been in his thoughts that he had failed to notice the approach of a page boy to his table. The lad was now standing beside him.

"Excuse me, sir."

"You are excused. What it is, laddie?"

"Wanted on the telephone, sir, please."

"What, again?"

The boy looked confused. Robin laughed.

"Right," he said, "I'll be along in half a second."

He finished his coffee and left the dining room. A few moments later he was in the telephone booth.

"Hullo?"

"Is that Mr. Murdoch?"

"It is."

"Scotland Yard speaking, sir. The Home Secretary's compliments, and will you kindly visit him at his house as soon as possible."

"Oh, er, yes I will."

"And, further, sir, will you please not come near us."

"Eh?"

"Don't come anywhere near us, sir."

Robin laughed.

"I had no intention of doing so! Who is that speaking?"

"The Acting Commissioner's secretary, Miss Dale."

"Oh! I beg your pardon, Miss Dale."

Robin heard a silvery laugh.

"I put it badly too, didn't I?" Robin heard the laugh again. "What I meant was that you must take no risk of your connection with us being discovered."

"I quite see," laughed Robin.

"Well, good-bye," said Miss Dale.

"Good-bye," said Robin.

Before he left the box he put through another call.

"Hullo?" said a voice.

"Morning, Louella."

"Oh, Robin! All well last night?"

Just for one second Robin hesitated.

"Very well. I say, Louella, the papers say your première was great."

"Oh, darling, do they? I haven't seen them yet."

"Neither have I," said Robin, "but I'm sure they do."

A scandalised "Oh!" came down the wires.

"Louella!" went on Robin quickly, "I'm in an awful hurry; I'm moving in very high and mighty circles just now, and I can't keep a bigwig waiting whom I've got to see. But can you come to lunch?"

"Robin!"

Louella's pretty voice was arch.

"Don't you know that a leading lady is booked up for weeks ahead?"

"That'll be all right then?"

"What!"

"Ritz at one."

"But . . ."

"Put him off. If I'm a little late, order me a cocktail. So long!"

Robin rang off and smiled to himself.

He went out then, and it took him only a few minutes to reach the residence of the Home Secretary. He was admitted at once to the minister's study, and had not long to wait before the great man himself entered the room.

"Good morning, Murdoch."

"Good morning, Sir Henry."

"Sit down, sit down. This is a bad business."

Robin sat down and said nothing. There was nothing to say; it was.

"When did you first hear of the abduction of Sir William?"

"Last night, when I returned from the docks, sir."

"From the docks?"

"Yes, sir, from the docks."

Quietly, and exaggerating nothing, Robin told him the story of the previous evening. The Home Secretary listened attentively until he had done.

"You did very good work."

"We were lucky, sir."

"Well, when do we raid? I need hardly say that every man I can lay hands on will be at your service."

"Thank you, sir. But not quite yet."

Deliberately Robin explained the situation. He stressed the fact that the safety of Sir William Blandyce, and also Tudor and Brand, depended on the complete success of the raid; and painted a lurid picture of what would happen should the attempt be made and not go entirely according to plan.

For a few moments the Home Secretary remained silent. Then, with a quiet smile, he looked up at Robin.

"Yesterday," he said slowly, "Sir William came to see me; Tudor and Brand had already gone. Talking of them and the situation as it affected them, he said something which has remained in my mind. He said: 'It is really comparatively unimportant. Don't think me callous. I am not. I am very fond of Brand indeed. But the important thing is to catch the Vulture and his gang at once and prevent any more of these murders. In short, to protect the public. If this can be done, it must be done, and if to attain this Tudor and Brand have to be sacrificed, they must be sacrificed!' "

He paused for a moment.

"You see what I mean," he went on suddenly, "Sir William, I know only too well, would like to be treated as he proposed to treat his subordinates, and he is right. Dash it, I know he's right!"

Robin looked at Sir Henry, and noted mentally the agitation of the Home Secretary. Whatever were his private feelings, and Robin could guess their nature fairly well-for he knew of the friendship between the man in front of him and Sir William Blandyce, Sir Henry felt it his duty to state plainly what he knew to be the truth, however distasteful it might be to him. Robin admired the man for sinking his own personal feelings when he knew his public duty led him on a different road.

"Yes," said Robin quietly, "Sir William was quite right. But, thank the Lord, sir, the occasion does not arise as yet. You see we can't raid at once, we simply can't. Deschamps pointed that out to me last night before he knew anything of Sir William's abduction. To raid now, or rather the first time a spy reports that another meeting is taking place, would be to court failure. First of all we must find out whether there is another means of egress from the place, wherever it is, that these Vultures meet. For if we raid by one entrance while the Vultures are leaving by another, all that we are doing is to warn them that their meeting place is known. And then we've got to start all over again. It will be terribly difficult to pick up the trail again."

The Home Secretary paused thoughtfully for a while. Then, with sudden purpose:

"I accept that argument. The other—the safety of the hostages—I could not accept. Not after the words of Sir William himself. But I see your point, and I agree. How long will it take?"

"It's in the lap of the gods!" said Robin seriously. "Goodness knows! A day, a week, a month! We are not in a position to hurry things too much."

"A month!"

Robin smiled.

"You are thinking of four more Sunday murders!" he said.

"And their effects." The Home Secretary spoke sharply, "I cannot give you a month! We can no longer keep the thing out of the papers, and the whole country would be in a panic by then. A week perhaps—no more."

Robin leant back in his chair.

"Sir Henry," he said seriously, "I think I am right in saying that this performance of the Vultures is the greatest threat with which the country has ever had to deal from the criminal classes. If that is so, we are extremely lucky to be in such close touch with the monster already. But we must not spoil our great chance; we must not rush headlong into possible failure, after such a promising start. Am I right?"

Sir Henry hesitated.

"Yes, I suppose you are," he said reluctantly.

"In that case I can promise you no time limit. We shall do our best, Deschamps and I, and when the time comes we shall want all the help that Scotland Yard can give us. But for the moment we must work alone, and although we shall work as rapidly as possible, you must give us our own time in which to work."

"If only we could stop the Sunday murders in the meanwhile!"

The words came out as a sort of cry, as a sort of appeal to providence! Robin, very seriously, put forward his viewpoint.

"It would be a mistake to do so even if we could. Just a minute, sir!"

He held up his hand to prevent the other interrupting him.

"Provided that the Vulture is lulled into a false sense of security, then he will not doubt the public house which we now know to be the meeting-place of his gang. And provided he does not leave it, then Deschamps and I have every chance of getting him there in the near future."

"That's all very well," said Sir Henry, "I know there's a lot of sense in what you say, but the public must be protected."

Robin laughed.

"I know," he said earnestly, "but Sir Henry, isn't it far better that a few should suffer for the ultimate safety of the many? Let me put it very clearly; if we raid at the next meeting what happens? We may or may not be entirely successful; again we may be partially successful. Anything but complete success would be fatal. Isn't it better to ensure this complete success at the cost of a certain delay even if it does mean the murder of another two or three men? It might be months before we again got on the trail of the Vulture if he were once raided and escaped!"

For some time the Home Secretary remained silent, deep in thought. Robin watched him with much anxiety; so much depended on the result of his deliberations.

Suddenly Sir Henry looked up and smiled.

"Have it your own way," he said, "I know you are right. But for heaven's sake prevent the Vulture from going for Molgistan next Sunday."

"Molgistan?"

"The Maharajah of that ilk. The owner of the Delawney pearls. He arrives in London to-day."

Robin looked up anxiously.

"But surely he will bank all his valuables?"

Sir Henry moved restlessly in his chair.

"The man's a fool!" he said irritably. "We offered him protection. When he refused it we implored him to bank the jewellery; again he refused, blast him! He says that his personal bodyguard is quite sufficient to protect the stuff. We can do no more, but he's asking for trouble. The priceless necklace is just the sort of bait which would tempt the Vulture, and the worst of it is that the whole affair is public property. That rag the *Evening Echo* had all the details in the early edition of two days ago, with pictures of the dusky bodyguard all bejewelled, beturbaned and beknifed!"

"But if anything happens to him it will surely be his own fault," said Robin. "You've done your best; you can't be held responsible."

"Oh, can't we!" quickly replied Sir Henry. "Can't we just! It's a matter of politics, my boy. Molgistan is known to be a very doubtful Maharajah. I mean, if not actively disloyal, he's by no means to be trusted. What would be the effect of his murder on his simple dusky subjects? They would immediately jump to the conclusion that we'd arranged it. There might be serious riots in India; although I wouldn't mind seeing the lad himself with his throat cut, I'd just hate the blame for riots to be heaped on my shoulders!"

For a moment the two men remained silent. Then Robin looked up.

"I'm afraid, sir," he said, "that it does sound precisely the sort of thing the Vulture would go for."

"Of course it does!" said the Home Secretary irritably, "but, if we can, we must prevent it. Molgistan's taken a house in Belgrave Square: we'll put plain-clothes men all round the place in spite of him.

He won't know anything about it. But I don't like it. Can't you do anything?"

Robin smiled.

"Something may occur to Deschamps," he said. "He's full of ideas. I'm going to see him in a minute, and I'll ask him."

"Ask him soon."

"I'm meeting him at eleven-thirty."

"Good."

There was a short pause.

"Well," said the Home Secretary, rising, "I think that's all. You are in sole charge of the case, Murdoch. As murders occur, Scotland Yard will attempt to solve them. If any discoveries are made, they will be communicated to you. But your job, my boy, is to catch that Vulture!"

"Yes, sir."

"You're very young, of course," said Sir Henry musingly, "for such a responsibility. But still, Sir William had complete confidence in you; so have I. For heaven's sake don't let that Raubvogel get hold of you!"

Robin laughed.

"I'll try not to. And thank you, sir."

"Not at all, not at all. Eh? Good luck. Let me know what you do. Good-bye."

He held out his hand; Robin took it and left the room.

Once in the street Robin made off towards the park; an importuning taxi drew close to the kerb.

"Taxi, sir?"

"Yes!" said Robin. And then, "No!"

The driver drove off grumbling, but Robin only smiled.

"Me for the old flat feet!" he said to himself. "It's safer. Me for the wide open spaces and the crowded streets. Me for where I can call for help. No, Mr. Raubvogel, I'll make it as difficult for you as I can, anyway. Ye Robin valueth hith thkin!"

## CHAPTER XI

ROBIN reached the Peter Pan Statue in Kensington Gardens on the stroke of eleven-thirty. There was no sign of Deschamps, and he walked about aimlessly for a little while, amiably cursing his friend's unpunctuality. A man with side whiskers, who also seemed either to have an appointment or nothing very much to do, was walking about as well.

After ten minutes had elapsed Robin began to feel a trifle anxious. What could have happened to make the Frenchman so late? The recent abduction of Sir William Blandyce and the two inspectors were sufficiently fresh in his memory to work on his imagination and make him nervous. The next moment Robin was angry with himself for such pessimism: how could the Vulture possibly know of the presence of Deschamps in the country? And yet how had he known of so many things, of the movements of Tudor and Brand and Sir Willam for example? And so much that was going on behind the scenes at Scotland Yard?

Robin's thoughts became distracted now by the strange movements of the man with side whiskers whom he had previously noticed. Wherever Robin went in his impatient ramblings, the fellow seemed to follow.

Robin determined to put the matter to the test. He increased his pace slightly, but not so much as to attract attention, and disappeared round a corner suddenly; once out of sight he stopped, and going on to the grass, hid behind one of the bushy trees. Almost as soon as he was safely concealed, the middle-aged side-whiskered gentleman came into sight.

Robin examined him: he looked like a retired schoolmaster, sedate, neatly if very quietly dressed, and rather slow of movement. But his actions gave the lie direct to his appearance for he had evidently hurried, and now looked about him furtively.

"Hullo!" said Robin to himself. "Are we off again?"

The stranger advanced cautiously to the next corner, and looked round it suddenly. A frown of annoyance became visible on his forehead.

Robin determined to take the bull by the horns. He came out from behind his corner and advanced along the path towards the stranger. The latter, glancing round and seeing him suddenly, promptly turned his own corner and disappeared from sight.

Robin broke into a run, and turned the corner.

"Poof!"

"What the devil!" gasped Robin. He had run full tilt into the stranger's arms.

"Ah! *Mon cher!* But you are quick! I was looking for a hiding place to continue our hide and seek!"

"Ye gods! Deschamps!"

"It is me," replied the Frenchman in a self-satisfied voice.

"Now, look here!" said Robin with good-humoured severity, "this is the second time you've made my hair stand on end! Last night in the pub and now with your foolish games. I've had about enough of it: you've wasted nearly a quarter of an hour."

"Not wasted, my old!" The Frenchman laughed. "This quarter of an hour has proved to me that my disguise is perfect. That is good; that is excellent. It would never do for the Raubvogel to know that I was in the country!"

There was a lot of truth in what he said, and Robin realised it on the instant.

"Yes, old friend, but he's not likely to see you here."

"He may see me anywhere with you," replied Deschamps seriously. "Where you are, the Raubvogel cannot be far away."

Robin laughed with a wry face.

"Thanks awfully!"

"But it is true, my friend. Consider! He is out for you, as you English say; we know that. That is why you stay to the places public where little harm can come. Is that not so?"

"I suppose it is."

"Of course it is. Therefore when you and I are together he may not be too far away waiting for his chance. It would not do for him to recognise me."

"Quite right, old son," Robin smiled. "But the next time kindly don't play hide and seek with me. It doesn't soothe the nerves!"

"Have you seen any one?"

"A most important personage."

"And is there any news?"

"Yes," said Robin. "Come along; I'll tell you as we walk."

He headed for Hyde Park Corner, and as they walked he told the Frenchman of his interview with the Home Secretary. Finally he told him of the Minister's fears for the safety of the Indian potentate.

"Ha!" said the Frenchman. "Ha! I like that!"

"You like what?"

"The arrival of the Maharajah."

"Well, Sir Henry doesn't."

Deschamps smiled.

"Perhaps not," he said, "but we do."

"We?"

"Yes, we. Listen."

Linking his arm in Robin's, Deschamps began to speak rapidly occasionally breaking into French when he got more than ordinarily involved.

"The Home Secretary he wants the Maharajah unmolested. Very well, we will try to please him. How? I will tell you: it will help us as well. At once you must communicate with Scotland Yard, and get them to send out all their spy men to pass the news around the underworld that a young Australian has arrived in this country with a trunkful of gold. Shall we say gold? Yes, we shall say gold. It is easy to dispose of, to realise on. That makes it all the more tempting. The address where he is staying—a house somewhere but not near Belgrave Square—must also be whispered. A house must be commandeered for the purpose. Then the evening paper must contain a paragraph—tucked away somewhere but not too tucked away—saying how odd it is that two great fortunes have arrived on the same day, and how odd it is that both of the owners keep them in their houses instead of being sensible. Do you see?"

"I see a few trees and green grass growing all round. What on earth are you getting at?"

"My old, you are a stupid!"

Deschamps spoke with some irritation; Robin laughed.

"Carry on, old friend. Be explicit, lucid, intelligible or whatnot."

Deschamps frowned at him. For a moment he remained silent.

"Who is this foolish Australian?" prompted Robin.

"You are."

"I am?"

"Yes, you."

"Thank you very much," said Robin. "And what else do I do or am? I mean—you know what I mean!"

Deschamps laughed.

"You go to the house which you have taken."

"Which I have taken? Oh yes, I'm the Australian of course."

"Which you have taken, with a big trunk very heavy. There you stay for the night and wait."

Robin stopped dead in his tracks.

"Now look here, old friend," he said. "That I do not do. It's playing into the Raubvogel's hands; all he's got to do is to walk indoors, say good evening, do the dirty, and deposit my body into the big trunk very heavy. No; thanks awfully all the same. Nothings doing!"

"But the Raubvogel does not know you are the Australian. Anyway, I hope you will see him."

"Oh, you do, do you!"

"Yes, listen!"

Deschamps moved on again, and Robin fell into step with him.

"Gold is always the robbers' delight because it can be cut up or melted down without being spoilt and without losing value. I'll bet, yes I will bet, that if the story goes round the underworld properly, and for that we must trust Scotland Yard, the Vulture will hear of it. He will say: 'Ha; This is an easy piece of meat. I will put off the Maharajah till next Sunday; to-morrow I will pluck the cock!' "

"Chicken," said Robin.

"Eh?"

"All right, cock if you like. Yes, go on; I'm beginning to see."

"Well, when he comes, he gets a surprise."

"Rude shock, false expectation, or whatnot."

"Yes, what he not expects. We may catch him, but even if we do not, your Sir Henry gets another week in which to protect your Maharajah."

"Neither Sir Henry nor the Maharajah are mine," said Robin, "but let that pass. You know, I'm beginning to like your idea. It smacks of sound common sense."

They walked on for a few minutes in silence.

"Deschamps, old friend, I believe you have a brain wave. Give me until after lunch to make up my mind, will you?"

The Frenchman hesitated.

"There is not much time to arrange things," he said uncertainly.

"Let me get it quite clear," said Robin quietly. "The untrue facts are announced unostentatiously and this evening I take up my abode in an empty house—by the way, I can't be alone? I must have some servants."

"An old male retainer."

"Who's that?"

"Me!"

Robin smiled.

"I should love to have you with me, old chap," he said, "but what about the pub? Somebody must watch it."

"I think not," Deschamps spoke quickly but seriously, "I think this is the one night in the week when we need not watch the pub. They are out on action on Saturday nights—or early Sunday morning."

"The man's right," said Robin shortly. "Very well. You and I are in there. With a trunk very heavy. Waiting. Are we going to tackle the lot when they come?"

"The flying squad, they are in the cellar."

"Armed to the teeth. But won't the Vulture's spies see them go in?"

"No." Deschamps took Robin's arm again in his excitement. "The house will be selected, the policemen will be in the cellar already *before* the news of the

Australian is given out. Then they can watch the house as long as they like. All they will see go in is the Australian and his old servant."

Deschamps hobbled along simulating great age for a few steps in his glee.

"And the trunk very heavy. By gosh! I believe you've got it!"

It was a neat idea, Robin could not deny that fact. But it was a gamble; the rumours might not tempt the Vulture, might leave him still determined to go for the Delawney necklace and leave the stories of fabulous quantities of gold alone. On the other hand it seemed the only chance; what else could they do? It was this fact which finally decided him.

"Yes, old friend, I'm with you!"

"You agree?"

"I do."

"We will have them!" cried Deschamps. "We will have them! And perhaps to-night. Oh, I hope to-night!"

"So do I," said Robin.

He spoke soberly, in striking contrast to the Frenchman, but he was no less excited. The prospect which had been before him earlier that morning—the prospect of assuming some disguise every evening and sitting about in that dockyard public house for hours on end, trying to fathom the secret of the mysterious door—had by no means been alluring. Now they had been given an opportunity to act; and although there was really not a very great hope of success, still the long shot might come off and in any event action was immeasurably more to be desired than passive waiting.

They were now approaching Hyde Park Corner, and for some time yet they walked along in silence, both deep in thought, both planning details in their minds. Then Deschamps turned to Robin.

"I will get the trunk," he said, "I will arrange all that side. I will get labels for it from the Australian Steamship Companies too. What about the rumours?"

"Leave that to me," said Robin, "I'll do the house as well, and I'll synchronise the start of the rumour with the moment when a posse of police are safely tucked away in the cellar."

"Yes," said Deschamps, "but let me know which house it is as soon as possible. There are things to arrange: a secret bell from the room in which you are and the cellar, for instance, to warn the policemen that the time has come for them to act. Until they hear that bell they must not move or show themselves."

"I'll let you know at once. Where are you lunching?"

"At my hotel."

"Stay on there afterwards," said Robin, "I'll ring you up as soon as I have the information."

The pair shook hands; if there were any one watching, this might remove all suspicion from the side-whiskered old gentleman into which Deschamps had turned himself. Then, as he turned to go, the Frenchman suddenly smiled:

"You won't forget the papers?"

"Not on your life! A nice little paragraph shall be composed by me."

"Good. *Au revoir,* my old."

He moved off, and Robin looked at his watch; there was still time to walk down Piccadilly to the Ritz and arrive at about one.

"Curse it!" said Robin to himself. "I'm getting tired of all this watching! But it's good for you, me lad, it's good for your health in more senses than one!"

He set off, and not very much later he arrived in the lounge of the Ritz Hotel. Robin looked around him.

Seated at a table facing him, a smile of welcome playing about her lips, sat Louella. For a moment Robin did not move towards her, but stood quite still, anxious to appreciate to the full the perfect picture which she made. It seemed impossible, thought Robin, that any one in the world could combine as did Louella all the feminine charms which most appealed to him: her daintiness, her slim figure and straight carriage, her piquant little elfin head and face. Robin shut his eyes and opened them again; yes, it was true. Louella could not have been improved upon.

He went to her and gently pressed her hand.

"This is splendid," he said.

"Did you expect me to come?"

"Of course!" laughed Robin. "You accepted."

"I accepted!" Louella's round eyes opened very wide. "Robin, that's a fib!"

"Well, you didn't say 'no,' did you?"

"I . . ."

"You couldn't resist my charming invitation!" grinned Robin. "Anyway, my dear, if it's any pleasure to you, I'm all thrilled. You know, goosey. Why do you always have that effect on me? Say something else quick; I will, otherwise the girl will think you're going to propose; dash it, I can't think of anything; offer her a drink. Have a cocktail?"

Louella threw back her head and laughed.

"What'll it be?"

"A side car, please."

"Waiter!"

A hovering waiter approached, and Robin gave the order.

"Why do all girls drink side cars?" asked Robin. "Don't answer me, because you don't know. Nobody knows. It's one of the great mysteries."

A huge dimple appeared near the corner of Louella's small mouth, but she carefully refrained from smiling.

"What's the matter, darling?" she asked. "Have you been drinking?"

"Not much," said Robin. "Only air. I've had a nice walk by the Serpentine."

Then, suddenly, he became serious.

"Louella, I know it's rude, but excuse me for a minute, will you? I really must telephone."

She smiled her permission.

Robin got through to Scotland Yard; and afterwards to the Home Secretary. He was engaged in earnest conversation for nearly twenty minutes; but he finally came out of the telephone box with a satisfied smile on his face.

"Louella, dear, I'm terribly sorry!"

"Aren't I patient!" laughed the girl. "As a matter of fact I nearly walked out on you."

"In which case I should have been found supine on the floor. But I couldn't help it; business!"

"Why is it," asked Louella, "that men always think the word 'business' will get them out of anything? Don't answer me, because you don't know. It's one of the great mysteries."

"Well, it was business," said Robin. "Honest, dear."

"I don't doubt you, darling. What of the papers?"

"The papers?" Robin looked at her surprised. "Oh, I see. Well, as a matter of fact I haven't had a moment to look at them, but I suppose your vanity has been duly flattered as usual. 'Another Superbus Success with the Incomparable Louella more Incomparable than ever!' "

Louella smiled.

"I don't mean that," she said. "They have been kind, but I've been rather crowded out this morning. I mean Sir William Blandyce."

"Sir William!"

"Yes, and this mysterious Vulture!"

"Let's have lunch," said Robin shortly.

They went into the restaurant and found a secluded table. When the meal had been ordered, and the waiter had retired, Louella returned to the attack.

"Was it in connection with the . . . Vulture, that you came to me to be made up last night?"

Robin looked at her, and saw the purpose in her eyes.

"I give in!" he laughed. But instantly he became serious again.

"Louella dear, please don't breathe a word of this to any one. Promise?"

"I promise."

"It was. He's been going for some time, of course."

"Then his letter wasn't a foolish jest?"

"Far from it."

"Are his claims true?"

"Yes," said Robin deliberately. "They are."

The return of the waiter with an appetising lobster mayonnaise, put an end to the conversation for a few moments. When he had retired again, Louella stared at Robin.

"Do be careful, darling!"

Robin looked at the glorious girl seated opposite to him, and read real anxiety in her eyes. There was something very pleasant in the thought that Louella cared enough to bother so much about him, to have any feelings for his safety. He smiled at her.

"My dear," he said, "I shall be very careful. Very careful indeed."

"I suppose I mustn't ask anything else?"

Robin laughed.

"Having gone so far, I think you might be allowed to go a little further if you want to!"

Louella hesitated.

"You know, Robin, I can understand his point of view—the Vulture's, I mean, to a certain extent. Can't you? When you come to think of it, it is rather hard for the unfortunate criminal! He's all alone against an organisation of trained and picked men, who number thousands and who have all the latest scientific discoveries for the detection of crime at their backs as well!"

Robin watched her as she was speaking, noted the slight flush on her cheeks. He smiled to himself; it was so like Louella ever to champion the underdog, the man faced with odds.

"How his men must love him! Think of it! He's given them an even chance, a thing they've never had before, a thing they never expected to have! I wonder who he is?"

"That," said Robin softly, "I should very much like to know."

"Miss Dale says . . ."

"Miss Dale?"

Robin, rather startled, looked at Louella.

"Which Miss Dale?"

"The one at Scotland Yard, silly!" laughed Louella.

"D'you know her?"

"Of course I do. She lives in the flat above me."

"Good Lord!"

"Don't say how small the world is! She says she thinks the Vulture must be some mad millionaire, who's banded these men about him. He must have money; he's got so many spies and people to pay and pay well, she says."

Robin laughed.

"Not a bad idea. What about . . ."

The waiter returned and interrupted them, and thence onwards they had little chance to talk except on trivial matters. When the meal was over they retired to the lounge again and there they had their coffee.

A page boy appeared.

"Mr. Murdoch?"

"Yes."

"Wanted on the telephone, sir."

Robin was away only a couple of minutes. Then he returned.

"I must go, dear. Thank you so much for coming."

"Business?"

"Business."

Louella rose to her feet. Her slender figure, its loveliness enhanced by the straight lines of her summery silken dress, looked to Robin more than ever alluring.

"Be careful, Robin dear!"

Robin raised her hand to his lips.

A few moments later and Robin was making with all possible speed towards the hotel at which Deschamps was staying.

## CHAPTER XII

IT took four porters all that they could do to get the trunk moving at all. Robin looked at Deschamps, made up marvellously to look like a very old family servant, and almost laughed to see him fussing over the luggage. He also wondered how on earth the Frenchman had made the trunk so very heavy, and what he had caused to be put in it.

True to his love for detail, Deschamps had made Robin come with him by car to a wayside station in the country, whence they had come up to London by train. Deschamps appeared to have overlooked nothing; steamship labels were plastered all over the trunks and valises, labels which to the outsider proved conclusively their connection with the boat berthed that day from Australia. The Frenchman himself had taken great pains over his make-up and seemed to be living in his part. A car had been ordered, and had met them, from a well-known hiring company, and an extra man had been asked for and sent along to help with the unloading.

At last all the luggage, including the great trunk, was safely stored away on the car, and Robin, whose ready-made suit provided by Deschamps seemed to him the very acme of discomfort, climbed into the back seat.

"Shall I come with you, sir?"

Again Robin had to struggle with himself in order not to burst out laughing. Deschamps, standing on the pavement and looking up at him, was indeed a comic spectacle. But Robin knew that for the benefit of the watcher who might or might not be looking on, the comedy must be carried out to the minutest detail.

"Hop in," he said.

The Frenchman climbed in with just that amount of difficulty which suited his apparent age, and the car moved off. Soon they were winding a way in the maze of traffic, bound for the house which had been prepared in Hampstead.

Robin unfolded an evening paper which he had bought on the platform, and searched it quickly for an expected paragraph. At last he found it. He read it with a smile, and then passed it to his companion.

"Not bad, what?"

Deschamps read the paragraph which Robin had pointed out:

> A Mr. Dickson, of Perth in Australia, arrives in this country to-day by the *S.S. Thesaurus*. Mr. Dickson is the possessor of large quantities of crude gold, which he invariably carries about with him in a large cabin trunk, selling just enough at a time to provide him with money for his immediate wants. This trunk is always in the charge of an old family servant who settled with Mr. Dickson's parents when they migrated to Australia in the 'nineties. This will be the first time that Mr. Dickson has visited the mother country and it is an odd coincidence that his arrival should happen on the same day as another wealthy member of the Empire who also holds somewhat quaint views on banking, the Maharajah of Molgistan. Mr. Dickson has taken a house in Charles Road, Hampstead,

where he will stay for a few days only before proceeding to the country of his ancestors which is in the North.

"Well?" asked Robin, when the Frenchman had returned the paper. "Is that all right?"

Deschamps laughed.

"Admirable!" he cried. "I like that bit about the length of Mr. Dickson's stay especially. It will point out to the Vulture that if he acts at all he must act at once, this night. That was very good."

"Thank you!" smiled Robin. "Although I say so who shouldn't, I liked that bit myself!"

They were fairly silent for the rest of the drive; but at last it was over and they drew up opposite the gate of a large detached house in Charles Road. With due heed to the part he was playing, Deschamps clambered from the car, and aided by Robin himself and the driver and extra man who had been sent, the box was removed to the house. It took some little time to move all the rest of the luggage as well, for Deschamps had provided a very fair quantity. At last, however, the men, well pleased with a handsome tip, drove off and Robin and Deschamps were alone.

"Ha!" said Deschamps. "It is now eight o'clock. We cannot expect anything until after midnight. Let me show you the arrangements I have made."

He took Robin to the top of the staircase leading down to the cellar.

"Down there," he said, "there are the twelve policemen who came round early this afternoon. I have fixed up a bell in there; no one is to move until the bell she sounds. Then they are to come up at full speed with drawn pistols."

"I trust they do!"

"They will, my old, they will. Very quick. I have impressed them with the necessity." He chuckled. "They are looking forward to an encounter with the Vulture. I have told them that they will be shot at on sight; therefore they must shoot themselves on sight."

"Good."

"Now come up stairs again."

Deschamps led the way to the sitting room in which the box reposed.

"Under the carpet—here"—Deschamps pointed with his finger—"there is the contact which works the bell. When you press on that spot with your foot, then the contact is made and the bell she rings. You can sit on that chair and wait till they arrive, and the moment they do, just press your foot down."

"Quite simple!" said Robin with a wry smile.

The Frenchman turned towards the door.

"You see that little light?"

Robin followed with his eyes the direction of the outstretched hand and saw a small red electric globe fixed to the wall just above the door.

"I do."

"When I turn on the current, that will be set in motion. I will tell you what I mean. I have placed wires all over the ground floor of the house; if any one moves over them when the current is on, then that little light will shine out a warning to you and you will get ready. You have your little pistol?"

Robin smiled.

"Most certainly! I never move without it now."

"Use him before your visitor can use his own."

"Trust me to try!"

Deschamps stood back a pace.

"You are pleased with the arrangements, Mr. Dickson?"

Robin laughed outright.

"I'm delighted, old friend, delighted. But tell me, where is my most faithful servitor going to be all this time?"

"I shall be up on the floor above."

"Oh! Why? Wouldn't it be very much more pleasant if we were together?"

Deschamps sat down and lit a cigarette before replying.

"Very much more pleasant," he said quietly, "but very much less useful. We must have all the approaches barred if we are to have full warning of the arrival of our Vultures. They may come in by the first floor windows, using a ladder from the back to reach them. That is quite a popular method of doing it. If they do —well, I shall be ready for them!"

"And can you communicate with the chaps in the cellar if they do?"

"In the same way as you can."

"Good enough."

Robin also lit a cigarette. Deschamps seemed to have thought of everything; Robin admired his energy and inventive skill, and also his truly remarkable powers of organisation. He had done everything in a remarkably short space of time, and amazingly efficiently.

But he was to get yet another proof of the Frenchman's thoughtfulness almost at once. As soon as they had finished their cigarettes, Deschamps rose to his feet.

"Hungry?" he asked.

Robin looked at him in surprise.

"I could certainly do with a mouthful."

"You shall have him. Come along."

Wondering, Robin followed him out of the room and to another, evidently used as the dining room. The sight which met his eyes fairly staggered him.

On the table was an excellent cold supper spread out, with two places laid. Standing in a bucket of ice, a bottle of champagne was visible.

"Ye gods!" cried Robin. "Deschamps, old cauliflower, you're a blinking marvel!"

"It is nothings!" said Deschamps modestly.

They sat down and set to the meal with a will. Everything was excellent, and the wine of a magnificent vintage.

"Does it please you?" asked the Frenchman suddenly.

"It delights me!" laughed Robin. "I feel I could tackle all the Vultures in the world after this, and single-handed!"

"Then I am satisfied. It was to make you feel like that that I brought it, for, my old, we have a nasty nerve-racking night in front of us!"

His words were spoken very seriously and Robin answered in the same strain.

"I know. But somehow, old friend, I'm rather looking forward to it. It would be so wonderful to get that Vulture! To catch him red-handed, to . . ."

"I trust not too red-handed!"

Robin almost blushed. Deschamps had spoken shortly, rather suddenly had cut him off in the middle of his tale of dreams. And Robin knew that he deserved it; extravagant hopes and visionary success was no frame of mind in which to enter on an engagement of such magnitude.

"How did your Sir Home Secretary like our plan?"

Robin smiled.

"He was a bit sceptical at first, the blighter! But he soon came round when he realised that it was the only possible thing we could do in order to distract the Vulture from the Maharajah. After a bit he became quite keen, and did all he could to help."

"Good. Well, my old, let us drink to our success to-night!"

The two men raised their glasses to each other, and drained them silently.

It was getting dark now, outside; the summer sun had set, and the light had faded.

"I think, to our positions. No?"

"Yes, I think we'd better."

"Not that they will come till after midnight," said Deschamps, rising from his chair, "but still we had better be on the safe side. You will not fall asleep?"

Robin laughed shortly.

"Not blinking likely!"

"No!" said Deschamps. "No blinking. The eyes, they must be very wide open. To see all things. And the ears too, to hear all sounds. And the nose, to smell all odours. Come."

He saw Robin to the sitting room; then, disappearing for a moment, suddenly returned.

"The light she is on?"

Robin looked up. The globe above the door was glowing red.

"Good. I will disconnect, and then connect again. If it happens after that, be on your guard, my friend."

For a moment Robin saw him smiling at the door; then it closed and the youth was alone.

Robin sat down in the chair which had been so carefully placed by Deschamps, taking note of the very slight swelling in the carpet where the connection for the warning bell was hidden, and avoiding it. He lit an electric light which had been placed on a small table by his side, and took out his cigarette case. When his smoke was going nicely, he leant back and tried to analyse his feelings.

It was now nearly ten o'clock. Therefore there must pass two hours before anything could be expected to happen, and even if the bait did prove successful it was unlikely that the Vulture or his satellites would appear for an hour or two even after that. Therefore, at a conservative estimate, there must be a vigil before him of at any rate three hours.

And then? If the rumours which had been so discreetly spread throughout the underworld had been believed; if that short arresting paragraph inserted cleverly in the evening papers so as to be noticeable and yet not to be too obvious, a sort of makeshift paragraph which the papers perhaps had included in the issue in order to make up space, but which held for some such striking confirmation of vague stories already heard, if this were acted on; then the Vulture would come, as often he had come to a house before, bent on a robbery with violence. The history of the man's crimes showed only too clearly that robbery was not enough: that some warped kink in the man's mentality demanded bloodshed, a sacrifice, as well.

What of it? Only this, that in spite of the Frenchman's astute preparations, in spite of that little light above the door which would glow a bright red warning, there would be little time in which to act. The twelve policemen, waiting anxiously down below, eager for a chance to get at the foul murderer and his gang, would come in, armed to the full, with all possible speed; but that might not be quick enough. Before then Robin might well be engaged in a desperate combat to defend his life.

And there was always the chance that warning light or summoning bell might fail to act.

Robin cast this last thought headlong from him. It was no sort of possibility to contemplate on the eve of such a vigil as this. He crushed out his half-smoked cigarette, threw it to the fireplace, promptly lit another.

Then Robin laughed.

"Now then, me bonny lad!" he said to himself, "what's the matter? Champagne or nerves? Pull yourself together, Mr. Murdoch!"

Thus self-encouraged, he thought more sanely. It was true enough that there would be very little time, but there was one probability which he had overlooked. The Vulture killed to kill: that had been proved by the nature of the Sunday murders. It was unlikely, therefore, that he would kill at once; far more likely that he would gloat over the agony of mind to which he put his victim before striking the fatal blow. And, as Robin almost surreptitiously slipped his hand into his pocket and felt his fingers close over the vicious little automatic which lay in readiness therein, he smiled grimly to himself. When the Vulture did arrive, if the carefully laid bait succeeded in attracting him, Robin proposed to take no undue risks. He would signal and shoot at one and the same time.

Robin looked at his watch: Ye gods! Only half-past ten! At least another couple of hours before anything was likely to happen.

Robin picked up the evening paper; at once his eye was caught by the paragraph which he himself had written. He smiled; he was in a more tranquil frame of mind now, he had his nerves under control. Would to God that the ruse was successful, would to heaven that the Vulture was even now preparing to come to his doom!

Robin glanced through the paper, looked at the cricket results on the sporting page. But they failed to hold him. He could not get out of his head vague imaginings of what might happen. Again impatiently, he took out his cigarette case and lit a cigarette. As he placed the dead match in the ash tray he was surprised to see the stumps of three smokes already there.

"Gosh!" said Robin quietly. "And one in the fireplace that makes four. Four already! Robin, me boy, you'll have none left if you go on at this rate. And you'll want one after the fray, you know!"

He grinned.

"That's better. That's more the spirit!"

He fell to wondering what Deschamps was doing up the stairs. Probably engaged in working out another trap should this one fail, thought Robin. An amazing fellow, that Deschamps! Always the same, whether actively engaged or quietly unoccupied. Just as cheerful, as unflurried, whether in danger or at his ease. And yet, as Robin knew well, the possessor of a very vivid imagination.

Slowly the minutes dragged by.

Robin thought of everything under the sun and the moon. Louella took a foremost part in these deliberations: Robin tried to place a time limit on her infatuation for the stage, for her love of the public's adoration, for her wedlock to her art. "Then," he said to himself, "then I'll ask her. But it isn't fair now, it simply isn't fair to drag her away from everything she loves. I don't believe, at the moment, she could live without it all. And she's terribly young!" He smiled to himself: "But she'll never be older, the darling! She's . . ."

A clock outside chimed midnight.

Robin sat up with a jerk. He wondered whether he should put out the light or not, and came to the conclusion that it didn't really matter. "I'll keep it on, then," he said, "it sort of helps, somehow."

He slipped his hand into his pocket, and pulled out his automatic. This he laid in readiness across his knee.

"I don't know," he said suddenly, "after all, if I do put it out they can't see me straight away, and I can see them."

He turned out the light.

Robin sat alone in the darkness, a tense shadowy figure. The minutes dragged by.

So abruptly that it made him jump, a red glow suddenly lit up the room. Robin glanced at the wall over the door, and as he did so he picked up the pistol and moved his foot so that it rested gently on the bulge in the carpet.

"So they have come!"

He scarcely breathed the words. Every nerve on the alert, he waited. The red glow from the wall made the room seem weird, unfriendly.

## CHAPTER XIII

THE seconds dragged by.

Nothing happened. Still the red glow of the electric bulb above the door faintly illumined the room, casting awesome shadows. Still Robin sat motionless, longing to press his foot upon the carpet and thus summon the help that he knew would come in all haste from the cellar below. But to do that prematurely might be to wreck the whole enterprise, and with a great effort he withstood the temptation. Robin felt great beads of perspiration gathering on his forehead and round his temples; the strain was frightful.

Still nothing happened. Robin loosened his fingers, firmly gripping the butt of the automatic, at the ready, in his hand. He was afraid that if something now happened to startle him again, the forefinger, which he knew to be caressing the trigger, would act involuntarily. But he held on firmly enough all the same, quite firmly enough to make very sure that the weapon could be brought into immediate use if need be.

The seconds dragged on; no sound came from the silent house; Robin could hear his breathing unnaturally loud and the beating of his heart. He held his breath; struggled with himself to make no sound, yet to hear the slightest noise himself. He kept his eyes fixed on the door handle, almost seeing it turn in his imagination, longing for it to do so and end the suspense in one way, hating the thought of it in another.

What were they doing? Why did they not come? Were they on their way upstairs towards Deschamps?

Robin, as he realised that possibility, wanted to shout a warning. But he checked the hoarse cry on his dry lips just in time. Memory had come to him that Deschamps also had a warning light, that Deschamps would be on the alert just as he was.

What were they doing? Minutes must have passed by now.

And then, without so much as a shadow of prefigurement, Robin felt something lightly touch his throat and remain there.

"Don't move," a voice spoke quietly in his ear. "Not one little movement! It is a knife that you feel, a knife of great sharpness! Now, lean backwards slowly!"

Robin felt the cold sweat of fear; he shuddered. Out of the corner of his eye he could see a huge dark shape leaning over him, in imagination he could feel that knife slitting his throat from ear to ear. There was nothing to do but obey; but as he did so, as he leant backwards in obedience to the other's command, his left foot pressed firmly on the floor. Would to God that nothing went wrong now!

Robin had no time to consider how the man had made his unexpected and amazing entrance: he was in acute danger, and he knew it. If only the fellow would remove that razorlike edge from his throat! Before the others came, at any rate! Otherwise as he went, the fellow might cut his throat and deprive him of all the fruits of victory.

"Drop that gun!"

Robin, leaning back against the chair, his foot still firmly pressing the tiny bulge in the carpet, released his automatic. It fell to the floor with a dull thud. Then, so suddenly that he was powerless to resist, Robin felt the knife removed and a rope substituted. This was passed quickly under his arms and round his body. In a trice he was trussed up to that chair so thoroughly that he felt himself its companion for life.

The shadow moved round from behind him and stood in full view.

Never before had Robin witnessed such an awe-inspiring spectacle. There was no shape about the body, none whatever. It seemed, in the red half-light, unnaturally tall and to be enveloped from neck to feet in some long robe. But it was not this shapeless figure which held his concentrated gaze.

Robin felt the blood freeze in his veins.

From the neck upwards all trace of humanity departed: the beaked head of a vulture stared at him in the darkness.

"Good evening, Robin Murdoch!" said a hard, guttural voice. "A pity you did not take my advice, *nicht wahr?*"

"Good God!" Robin scarcely breathed the words. "The Raubvogel!"

*"Ja!"* replied the figure curtly. "Come to keep the appointment which I promised to you."

Why was there no sign or sound from below stairs? Robin pressed again upon the carpet.

"Splendid!" he said, as lightly as he could. "I've been looking forward to seeing you."

*"Ach!* Well, I am here. We will see whether your looking forward was the right word."

He advanced his cruel beaklike mask close to Robin; the youth could not withstand a violent desire to draw himself back into his chair.

Then, suddenly, the figure of the Raubvogel laughed. It was a mirthless sound.

"We meet again, Robin Murdoch! The last time, in Germany, you gave me my instructions. But you and that idiot of a Frenchman who was with you—you both got squeamish when I killed in order to get the information which you wanted. You left me in the lurch, you two!—I have never forgotten that!"

There was something sinister in that shapeless figure as it stood towering over Robin. There was an ominous portent in the words which had been used.

"You disobeyed your instructions!" said Robin unabashed. "You deliberately killed for the sheer pleasure of killing. There was no need, yet . . ."

"Silence!"

Why in heaven's name didn't they come? Drops of sweat began to gather on Robin's eyelashes, blurring his sight.

"But I had it in my heart to forgive," went on the Raubvogel quietly. "When I came over here, I sent you a note. There was no need to do so; I could have killed you in your sleep!"

For the first time Robin noticed one of the fellow's hands just visible from among the many folds of his robe. Robin stared fascinated at the long, tapering fingers, at the cruelly pointed nails. And as he watched, the Raubvogel slowly curved his fingers so that they took on a resemblance to the vicious claw of some wild bird of prey. In spite of himself Robin shuddered.

"Instead I gave you a chance. What use have you made of it?"

Robin remained silent. He was scarcely paying any attention to the words of the weird figure before him; for the first time something very much akin to despair was gnawing into his intelligence. Something must have gone wrong with the bell, otherwise surely those men secreted downstairs would already have been in the room to release him? In an agony of mind he pressed on the carpet with all his might.

The Raubvogel laughed dryly.

"It is no good trying to ring that bell!"

"What?"

"I cut the wire myself," he laughed again, mirthlessly. "My chief, the Vulture, does not let his most valued men fall into booby traps!"

But even as he was speaking, as he was pronouncing the death sentence on any hope of help from down below, another thought struck Robin. Even if this were so and the bell was out of action, there still remained Deschamps upstairs. Surely, upon seeing his warning light and hearing no sound, he would realise that something had gone wrong and creep downstairs to investigate? Robin knew the man's courage and felt certain that sooner or later this was what he undoubtedly would do. Therefore, although there could be no denying that his position at that moment was perilous in the extreme, Robin realised that if only he could keep the Raubvogel in conversation and delay him from action, there still remained a faint hope of release from his ghastly crisis.

"By the way," said the Raubvogel, suddenly, and in quite a pleasant tone of voice, "the Vulture asked me to apologise to you for not being present in person at this your execution."

"Oh!" said Robin rather uncertainly. "That's very nice of him."

"He is engaged to-night elsewhere. In Belgrave Square, in fact!"

Robin had the impression that he was being watched very carefully for any sign which he might give. In truth his heart had sunk within him at the words; so all their trouble and the dreadful situation in which he found himself, had all gone for nothing! Belgrave Square! So the Maharajah was to receive the unwelcome visit after all their high hopes!

He did not think the Australian was worth a personal visit. Scotland Yard was too keen that he should think so.

"Well," said Robin suddenly to himself, "I've learnt something, anyway, if I do get out of this. And that is that the Raubvogel and the Vulture are two different people."

"Come!" said the Raubvogel. "Prepare for death!"

"Now look here," said Robin quickly, striving to keep a quiver out of his voice, doing his utmost to hide his anxiety, "don't be an ass. You can't just kill me in cold blood like this! I'm . . ."

He stopped abruptly. The Raubvogel had taken a quick step towards him.

"I can kill you how and when I like," he hissed. "You have had your warning—you would not take it. It would not have been so bad for you if you had kept out of the whole affair, but you have done the very reverse; you have mixed yourself up in it and on the side opposite to the Vulture. You had no call to; you could have stayed quietly at your own work even if you had not left the country as I requested. Therefore—prepare for death!"

"How does one prepare for death?"

The Raubvogel, staring at Robin through the slits in the ugly, grotesque mask which served as eyeholes, was amazed to see that the youth, though very pale, was smiling.

"How do I know? Do you pray?"

"Often."

"Well, pray now."

"There's just one thing about all this that I'd like to say," said Robin suddenly.

"What is it?"

"When a fellow's going to be executed," went on Robin, "he is always given more or less what he wants during his last few hours. At least, that's the custom in this country."

"And in most countries, I believe."

What on earth had happened to Deschamps? Why didn't he come?

"Well . . . er . . ." Robin was talking at random. Time had to be wasted! Every minute was of the utmost value. "Well . . . er . . . I'd like to ask a few questions."

"What sort of questions?"

"Well, if I'm going to die, it doesn't matter much my knowing the answer to some of the mystery, does it?" Robin, as quietly and unobtrusively as possible, struggled with his bonds. Oh, where had Deschamps got to? "I mean, who is the Vulture?"

The Raubvogel laughed shortly.

"I do not know," he said. "I have seen him only once without his mask, but I have heard that he is a master of disguise. He was a very old man when I saw him, but I know that he is not. But enough, my friend!"

"Why shouldn't I yell for help?" suddenly asked Robin.

"No use!" The Raubvogel's voice had taken on another quality, a harsh cruel tone had crept into it. "No one would hear. Good-bye, my friend, good-bye."

"By God, some one will hear! *Help!*"

Robin let out the cry with all the power of his lungs. Since Deschamps hadn't come, it was possible that he was still creeping down the stairs sacrificing speed for silence. But Robin knew that speed was the only thing that could save him now; the Raubvogel had withdrawn both his arms from the folds of his robe, was leaning over him. In his imagination Robin could almost feel this human monster's nails ripping his throat.

Robin could not free himself from his bonds. Sweat was pouring from him now, blinding him, adding to the ghastly strain which had driven him to the very edge of the abyss of panic. Violently he concentrated on one great final effort, and struggled with all his might against the rope. He felt the chair sway, and the next minute it toppled over. Robin, still bound to it as firmly as before, crashed to the floor.

He heard the Raubvogel's ghastly mockery of laughter.

*"Help! Help!"*

The words died away in his throat to give place to a loathsome gurgle. Robin, almost fainting, saw a figure crouch over him, felt cold cruel fingers seize his neck and dive into his throat. He could not see, he could not breathe, he could not shout.

Something sang in his ears. Far above him little red warning globes spun round in an alarming manner, chasing each other. He shut his eyes. They still persisted.

Robin knew no more.

The Raubvogel rose to his feet.

Robin lay still.

## CHAPTER XIV

AT just about the same time that a tall slim figure slipped from the shadows of the wall of a certain house in Charles Road, Hampstead, and surreptitiously glided in the darkness to the road itself and thence away, there was occurring a strange meeting in the basement of a large house in Belgrave Square. One candle only illumined the room, probably normally used as a servants' hall, and the long shadows cast by the flickering candle flame were grotesque in the extreme. But they were no more grotesque than the weird figures who caused them, standing all round the rough wooden table. These men were in various costumes; three were clad immaculately in evening dress, another was in chauffeur's uniform, and three others were in ordinary day clothes. The eighth figure, smaller than the rest, was wearing a robe of black silk which fell in folds until it grazed the floor.

This last figure had no headdress, and the features and hair were those of a good-looking young woman. She remained slightly apart from the rest, watching them with a faint but rather cynical smile playing about her lips.

They were a strange collection, these seven men. Each was wearing a tight-fitting black silk mask which completely obscured their features; two slits served for eyeholes and a third for the mouth. They were standing about, talking in low whispers, while the man in chauffeur's uniform was helping himself from the remains, which were still on the table, of what had evidently been a most excellent cold supper.

The woman remained aloof, watching the odd sight. Once she looked round at the barred and shuttered windows, possibly to make quite sure that this work had been well done and that no hint of the candlelight could be seen from the outside. Satisfied she turned again and looked steadily at the seven men.

There was tension in the air, of that there could be no doubt. These men betrayed a state of nerves by quick odd movements, by sudden glances to discover the meaning of the slightest sound. One man only did not seem to be affected, but continued quietly munching at his food; he in the chauffeur's uniform. The woman laughed softly.

At the sound every eye was turned towards her. They saw her look at a watch, and then look up at them.

"Are you all ready?"

She spoke very softly but every man heard. A low growl of assent came from six voices. The seventh continued munching his food.

"You know precisely what to do?"

Again they assented.

"He should be here soon," she continued. "Any minute now. And the moment he arrives there is to be no delay. Straight up to the top of the house, through the skylight and on to the roof. Across the intervening space on to the next roof. Down through the skylight. One, you will remain on the roof on guard. The next house is built on the same principle as this one, which you have just been over; the few changes you have made yourselves acquainted with from that plan." She nodded towards the table where an architect's plan was lying. "The top floor should be unoccupied: it may not be: deal at once with any one who may be in the way. The next floor is the all-important one: the big door on the right contains the little safe in which are the Delawney pearls—and other little things." She smiled. "Two, Three, Four, Seven, you will go in. The chief will be with you. Remember one of those four guards will be awake. Use the squirts at once. Are all the pistols full?"

The four men addressed nodded, and showed each in turn a little weapon which looked very like a child's water pistol.

"Good. Six, you will continue downstairs. Molgistan sleeps alone in the big bedroom: first on the left. You have your knives; you know what to do."

A mirthless, merciless chuckle answered her.

"As soon as you have done it, right upstairs and out of the house. The others, if they have done their jobs before you, will wait; if not, they will follow. Then all back across the roof and down to here. Remember, no hesitation, no sound; those are the two watchwords for to-night."

"The safe?"

A low voice asked the question.

"To be brought back. It is small . . . but valuable."

Again the girl smiled.

"Very terse, very well put. I congratulate you, my dear. No words wasted, yet every point covered. Excellent!"

All eyes had swung round towards the door. An ominous figure sood there in the half-light, looking enormous, distorted perhaps by the shadows from the candle.

"The chief!"

The Vulture stood in the doorway. He was clad in a dark suit, and over his head he had placed his vulture's mask with its cruel beak. He spoke again at once.

"But one thing has been omitted." His voice was sharp, commanding, angry. "I expected you to be quite ready."

"They . . . they are!" faltered the woman.

"They are not. How the hell can three men expect to escape notice in shining, starched shirtfronts? Where are the jerseys?"

The three men in evening dress leapt to repair the omission. From a small suitcase in the corner of the room they withdrew three black pull-overs which they donned after removing their tailcoats. They looked lithe, sinewy, vicious almost, as they turned.

"Good. Follow me. And as you have heard, no hesitation, no sound. The job must be done quickly."

The small procession followed the Vulture from the room, leaving the man in chauffeur's uniform and the girl alone.

They followed their leader up the stairs in single file, and as they did so the last figure carefully pulled on a pair of very thin rubber gloves. This completed, he carefully wiped and polished the handle and blade of two wicked-looking knives which he took from his pocket, using a chamois leather cloth. This he returned to his pocket, retaining the knives in his gloved hand.

They climbed through the skylight on to the roof.

Very carefully, very silently, taking advantage of every shadow cast by chimney pots on the sloping roof, the little procession reached the other house, next door. But in spite of care and silence, they moved with great speed. Each man seemed to be as sure-footed as a cat, and just as noiseless.

The other skylight offered no serious opposition. Number One dealt with it effectively.

Six shadowy figures passed through it in rapid succession; one remained outside, crouching on the roof.

There was no one on the top floor. The door of the next floor below was reached; here one figure detached itself from the rest and continued down the stairs. Still could be heard no sound.

Six found himself opposite the door. He opened it, slipped through, shut it again. He stood quite still, listening. The sound of a man's deep breathing could be heard.

He approached the bed with the lithe stalking movements of a panther. He stood for a moment at the bedside, getting his bearings. Then flash went one knife, crash went the other! Six grinned to himself in the darkness, showed his misshapen teeth like some animal. Then came a horrible gurgling sound. Six grinned all the more.

Then just as soundlessly as he had come, like some ogre of destruction in the blackness of the night, the man left the room.

He paused for a moment outside the room above. Faint sounds came to him through the half-open door: he looked in. A figure came towards him at once.

"Well?"

Six could only just hear the Vulture's softly spoken query. He grinned to himself. He nodded.

"Ah!"

Six could just make out the forms of four men lying huddled in the corner. Other shapes were moving towards him, carrying something small which seemed to be heavy. He made way for them.

The little procession returned to the roof, more slowly this time, but just as soundlessly. From first to last there had been no sound of any sort.

Back across the roof they went, as surefooted, as quiet as ever. Down through their own skylight: back to the cellar below.

The girl looked at her watch as they entered.

"Well, my dear?"

She looked up and smiled.

"Seventeen minutes. Pretty good."

"Very good," said the Vulture in a satisfied voice. "Get on with it, Eight."

The man in chauffeur's uniform leapt to his feet. A small safe had been placed on the table, which now had been cleared of all traces of food. Various tools were lying to hand.

The man worked steadily for a quarter of an hour. Then, with a satisfied exclamation, he drew back. The Vulture approached and opened the safe.

From it he withdrew several jewel cases, which he placed in his pockets.

"We will examine these later," he said. "You will now leave in accordance with your instructions. Through the house to the garage at the back. Through the garage and away at your stated intervals."

He turned to the girl.

"You will supervise, my dear. When all have gone, Eight will drive you home."

The Vulture moved to the door. Once there he stood for a moment looking back.

"An excellent night's work!" he said. "If this goes on we shall soon be able to retire on our hard-worked-for earnings! My congratulations to you all. Instructions for our next meeting will be conveyed to each of you in the usual manner."

He turned. The next moment he was gone.

One by one the six men left the room at intervals, until at last only the girl and the chauffeur remained. When they were alone, the man unmasked and put on his uniform cap, stuffing the mask away in his greatcoat pocket.

"He's a marvel, is that Vulture!"

The girl smiled; the chauffeur's words were so obviously sincere, so obviously prompted by the share of the spoils which were to come to him. The girl found herself wondering whether, if failure were to come, the Vulture would have trouble with his men?

All the way home, in the back seat of the car, she pondered on that question. Exactly how far would their loyalty last in the face of adversity? The Vulture had spoken of retirement certainly in a jocular manner. But she wondered if he would not be well advised to clear off soon?

The chauffeur drew up the car in front of a great block of flats. The girl got out.

"Good night, Jim."

"Good night, miss. Same time in the morning?"

She nodded. She went to the door and passed into the lift. She reached a fourth floor flat. She withdrew a latchkey from her pocket. She let herself in.

## CHAPTER XV

THE figure in the bed stirred restlessly. The two men talking by the window heard the sound and turned at once. The third man present, dressed in dark office clothes, beckoned to them to approach.

"He's coming round," he said.

"Won't it be bad to talk?" asked one of the others.

"No." The doctor rose from his chair by the bedside. "He's all right now; perfectly all right. He'll be a bit stiff round the throat for a few days, but nothing more. He may not want to talk very much," the doctor smiled, "and of course he'll bear the marks for some time. Extraordinary marks!"

The doctor leant over the unconscious man again.

"Amazing! That's what they are! Might have been made by some huge bird of prey!"

The other two men looked at each other. A meaning glance passed between them.

"I'll see you out, doctor," said the elder of the two.

He accompanied him to the front door in silence, and then, one hand upon the door knob, he turned:

"You will oblige me, doctor, by not mentioning what you have seen to-night."

"Of course not. I shall not breathe a word."

"If you did, if by some mischance you should let some hint of what has passed in this house to-night escape you, it might be fraught with serious consequences for quite a few of us!"

The doctor answered very seriously.

"You may rely upon me, Sir Henry. In my profession we frequently find ourselves with secrets to keep. We are accustomed to being discreet. You need not worry."

"Thank you, thank you." The Home Secretary smiled and held out his hand. The two men shook hands warmly as if to seal the bargain.

Sir Henry closed the door behind the doctor and returned to the room upstairs. He saw a youth, still fully clothed although collar and tie had been taken off, sitting up in the bed.

"Ah, Robin! Feeling better?"

"I'm not feeling too bad, sir."

Robin's voice was very low, very croaky.

"Lie down for a bit," remarked Sir Henry kindly. "Take your time. The doctor's just been and he says you're not too bad. But you must take it quietly. By heavens! It's a lucky thing Monsieur Deschamps got down in time."

"Ah! Why did I not come before?"

Robin had taken the advice of the older man, and was now lying flat on the pillows.

"What happened?" he asked.

"You darned nearly lost your life!" answered Sir Henry. "And in a way I feel responsible. I should never have left you to do this thing! It was a madly dangerous scheme, even if it did nearly work. Tell him what you saw, Deschamps."

The Frenchman sat down on the bed.

"My old, I sit up there in the room and I hear and see nothings. I get very bored. I read a book which I have with me. The hours pass, midnight comes. I wait in expectation. Nothings. I get very, very bored. I become sad because I think our plan she will not work. I read my book a little more."

He paused.

"But the light—the warning light?"

Robin's voice was still very hoarse.

"She does not work!" said Deschamps savagely. "That Raubvogel he cut the wire. And the fact that he missed the wire which warned you is the only mistake he make. I have found the wire of my light cut, and the wire to the cellar too. Oh! That Vulture! He is clever!"

"Yes. But . . ."

"Wait! I am coming to all that. I sit up there reading my book and all the time you are fighting a death struggle below and I know not of it! I sit up there, until suddenly I hear a shout. It is not loud, but it startles me. It is not nice to hear."

He paused. Robin, watching him from the pillows, saw that he was sincerely moved.

"I jump up. I run to the door. I listen. I hear nothing. Then I hear another shout. There can be no mistake this time, and it is a horrible sound. Cold shivers, they run down my back. I run out on to the landing."

Deschamps leant forward.

"I wait, I listen again to see if I can hear from where the shout comes from. I cannot. I go down the stairs, carefully, cautiously. I stand in the hall, uncertain what to do. Surely, I say to myself, it cannot be you who have shouted? No, because if you were in difficulty you would have rung the bell for the policemen. And there is no sign of them, no sound to say that they are coming. I cannot understand it. I turn towards your door, I am about to enter, when I hear a sound most horrible!"

Characteristically the Frenchman threw his hands to his ears as if to shut out all memory of the sound which he had heard.

"A gurgle! A groan, but a horrible groan! A wet groan!"

Robin almost laughed at the Frenchman's expression, but he checked the inclination just in time. It would never do to offend Deschamps, and undoubtedly he would be offended at any hilarity.

"For one, two, perhaps three seconds, I remain quite still, I cannot move with horror. Then, my pistol in hand, I dart into the room."

Deschamps now covered his eyes as if to brush away a painful sight.

"What do I see? You, my old, bound to an upturned chair, your head lolling sideways, your eyes starting out and all glassy! I think that you are dead! I sway! I am about to faint! But I do not faint, for now I have seen something else. There is a figure standing in the shadows near you, a strange figure in a long black dress and with a vulture's head!"

"The Raubvogel!" breathed Robin.

Deschamps heard him.

"Yes, I now know that it was the Raubvogel. But I had no time to think of who he was just then. He was the enemy and that was all I cared. I pointed at him with my pistol."

"Did you get him?"

Robin's voice was tense, anxious.

"No," answered the Frenchman disconsolately. "I have not even time to pull the trigger. He is upon me in a flash; I am knocked over as if I am a baby! The pistol goes one way and I flat on my back. He is through the door and gone before I have the time to know what has happened. But I jump up. I pick up my pistol. I look through the door. He is not there, he is nowhere in sight. I rush to the carpet where I know is the signal, and I think I give it. Then I look at you. I see you are breathing. I am thrilled. I look up. Where are the policemen?"

He paused for a moment.

"I give the signal again. I am impatient: I do not want to leave you, but I do not want that vulture to escape. I look out of the door again. There is no sign, no sound. I am puzzled. Very carefully I go down the stairs. I call quietly. But the policemen are not coming."

Rather unexpectedly Deschamps smiled.

"Then, suddenly, I remember that the man has been here and that I got no warning light upstairs. If that is so, perhaps the wire was cut. If that is also so, perhaps this other wire was cut which rings the bell. I rush down to the cellar. I open the door. They are all waiting there: they have heard nothing. I rush with them upstairs. I send them all over the house, all over the garden, while I go back to you. But it is too late: the Raubvogel has flown away."

"Damn!" said Robin from the very bottom of his heart.

"Yes," broke in Sir Henry, "that's exactly what I said, Robin! But anyway, although we've failed to trap the Vulture, we haven't done too badly. At any rate, we've distracted his attention from the Maharajah."

Robin looked up, startled by the words.

"I'm afraid not, sir."

"What!"

"I'm afraid not, sir. Listen."

Robin felt fairly well again now, felt strong enough at any rate to tell them of what had occurred. As briefly as possible he gave his two listeners an account of the incidents which had led up to the sudden appearance from behind him of the Raubvogel.

"How he got into the room without my knowing it," he said, "I haven't the slightest idea!"

"Through the window!" said Deschamps promptly. "You must have left it partly open, and been so absorbed in your contemplation of the door that you never heard him. At any rate, I found it wide open afterwards."

He paused for a moment.

"Yes, yes," he went on excitedly, "that must be it. That will account for the long delay between the time your warning light went on and his appearance. He was cutting the other wires when he turned your light on!"

"Just a minute," interrupted the Home Secretary suddenly. "You say the Vulture has gone for the Maharajah to-night, Robin?"

"Yes."

"Is there a telephone in this house?"

"Yes," said Deschamps. "She is below."

"I must ring up the Yard, and tell them to investigate at once," said Sir Henry seriously. "Break into it if need be! Curse these foolish potentates!"

He went to the door.

"Don't go on until I come back, Robin. I must hear everything."

He left the room. Deschamps looked at Robin.

"Lie back, *mon cher*. Close your eyes. Take what rest you can!"

Robin smiled: the Frenchman's obvious anxiety for his welfare touched him.

"I'm all right, old friend," he said huskily. "And it's due to you that I am. You must have disturbed him just as he was about to apply the finishing pressure. This is the second time you've saved my life! I'd like . . ."

"Shut!" said the Frenchman quickly. "Lie back. Close the eyes. I did nothings. Not more than you would do for me."

Sir Henry reappeared suddenly.

"They'll let me know here as soon as there is anything to tell. Feeling all right, Robin?"

"Not so bad, sir."

"Strong enough to go on?"

"Good Lord, yes."

Quietly Robin told them of his conversation with the Raubvogel, of his frantic attempt to delay the fellow from his ghastly project in the hope that Deschamps or some relief might come. He stressed the reference on the part of the Raubvogel to the Vulture.

"They're not one and the same person, so that's one mystery solved."

"I didn't think they were!" said Sir Henry suddenly. "That German scoundrel couldn't write letters like the Vulture does."

"As a matter of fact, he could, sir," broke in Robin. "His English is excellent, really excellent. But I think he was speaking the truth when he told me that he didn't know who the Vulture was. There's another thing as well which we've found out, sir, and I'm afraid it's much more serious."

"What's that?"

Both Sir Henry and Deschamps asked the question.

"The Raubvogel knew every detail of the trap which we had so secretly prepared. He gave me to understand that it was the Vulture who had told him. But only our three selves and Scotland Yard knew all the details. None of us three gave it away."

He paused.

"What are you getting at, Robin?"

Robin sat up in bed: he spoke very earnestly:

"That the information must have come from Scotland Yard. That there must be a leak, sir, in the one place where you'd never expect to find it!"

"Good God!"

Sir Henry uttered the exclamation with a horrified countenance. What Robin Murdoch was suggesting was nothing more or less than a sacrilege, yet . . . there was a great deal in what he said. Sir Henry wasn't very sure whether it did not constitute absolute proof.

"Consider a moment, sir!"

Robin's husky voice, filled with anxiety, came to his ears.

"Poor Sir William Blandyce was foiled at every turn. Why? Because the Vulture always knew what he was doing, what he was going to do. Tudor and Brand lost their liberty because of much the same reason; almost before they had been given instructions by the Commissioner, the Vulture seemed to know about it. It's very strange. And coming on top of our experience to-night it's more than strange—it's damning evidence."

"I believe it is!"

Sir Henry rose from his chair, and paced rapidly up and down the room. Suddenly he stopped and turned towards the other two, who were silently watching him.

"There's only one thing to do!" he said curtly. "I will inform the Acting Commissioner of our doubts. I will tell him to go through the past and present histories of every man under him with a fine comb. But in the meantime we must cut out Scotland Yard altogether: you two must carry on the investigation entirely by yourselves."

"And what do we do, Sir Henry, if we need help?"

It was the first remark that Deschamps had made for some time. He proceeded to enlarge upon his question.

"You see, we must now go back to that public house. It is our only—how you say it?—contact?—yes, contact with the Vulture. And if we succeed in finding the meeting place, and we succeed to find all the exits as well, we shall want to raid. What shall we raid with?"

A worried frown appeared on Sir Henry's forehead. Suddenly it cleared.

"I'll tell you what I'll do!" he cried excitedly. "I'll get a special squad of picked men down from Edinburgh. I'll pack them somewhere in the vicinity of London so that they can get to any fixed point under notice of one hour. And I'll take damned good care that no one at Scotland Yard or anywhere else will know anything about it!"

"Great!" cried Robin.

"Good!" echoed Deschamps. "That will be splendid!"

Abruptly a bell rang out sharply from somewhere in the house. All three men started, until a second later they realised that it was only the telephone. Sir Henry jumped up and rushed down the stairs.

"What will he hear?" asked Deschamps anxiously.

Robin swung his legs from the bed.

"Ah! My old! But are you well enough?"

Robin laughed.

"I'm not too bad, old friend. What will he hear? I wish I could tell you what I didn't think, if you get me! I'm afraid . . ." He stopped. The sound of Sir Henry's hurried return came to his ears. They waited: suddenly the man himself appeared at the door.

"Ah!"

Robin was not surprised at the Frenchman's exclamation: Sir Henry's face was white and drawn.

"I must go at once," he spoke quickly. "Molgistan has had his throat cut! The four men of the bodyguard have been found killed and mutilated. My God! This is awful!"

He rushed from the room.

Deschamps looked at Robin questioningly.

"Are you strong enough, my old?"

"Most certainly I am," said Robin quietly.

Deschamps rushed to the door and shouted down the stairs.

"Hi! Sir Secretary! Hi! Touch nothing! We are coming."

## CHAPTER XVI

THE Home Secretary did not wait for them, but he left a car. Robin, having quickly repaired the omissions in his dress necessitated by the doctor's attentions, followed Deschamps down the stairs a little uncertainly. He felt very much better, but he felt by no means well as yet. Waves of faintness, which though slight were irritatingly recurrent, kept returning to annoy him. He gritted his teeth, determined to overcome this weakness. His presence was required now, not only his presence but whatever aid his brain could give, and he knew that whatever happened he must summon up enough strength to complete the night's work.

They had been lucky in one thing only and that was the discovery of the tragedy in Belgrave Square so soon after the crime had been committed. Had any mistake been made by this arch-villain of a Vulture, then he would have had no time to repair it, and it was up to them to find it. Robin could not restrain a slight groan; the effort to think clearly was hurting his head like fury.

The Frenchman, who had been leading the way to the car, turned solicitously:

"My old, you are not strong enough! And no wonder! Come, you must go back to bed. I will drop you at your club and go on alone."

"Nonsense!" Robin spoke almost angrily. "If I die I'm coming, Deschamps. I'm damn well going to finish the night's work!"

Then, suddenly, he smiled.

"Sorry, old friend!" he laughed. "But I wouldn't be out of this for anything! This is the first time we've got on to the Vulture's trail whilst it's been quite fresh. He can't have been gone from Belgrave Square more than an hour or two, and we may pick up something useful. Anyway, I'm feeling better!"

As if to prove his words, Robin pulled out his cigarette case, and lit up. The soothing influence of the tobacco immediately began to do him good; he felt his nerves less on edge, and the throbbing in his head grew less strong. But his throat still hurt him badly; it required quite an effort of will to swallow, and not to pull off his collar, loose even as it was. Robin grinned to himself: these were minor discomforts which would pass off very shortly; he was lucky to have them to endure. Yes, that was the way to look at it! He was lucky even to be in pain, he might so easily have been beyond all that.

"I suppose he got the pearls all right?"

Deschamps grunted.

"There can be little doubt. What was it Sir Secretary said? 'The four men of the bodyguard have been found killed and mutilated'! I should say that they were not only the guard for the Maharajah, but also for the Delawney pearls."

"Yes."

Robin admitted the unpleasant fact thoughtfully.

Still, he told himself, what more could have been done than had been done? The foolish dusky monarch had refused to accept police protection or to bank his valuables, and in spite of this an outside guard of plain-clothes men had been placed over his house without his knowledge. If even then the Vulture had succeeded, and as far as they then knew had succeeded so completely, no blame could be attached to Scotland Yard. In the face of difficulties made for the authorities by the victim of the outrage himself, they had taken all the precautions in their power. Robin knew that they were blameless, but remembering Sir Henry's advice, he wondered how the news of Molgistan's violent death would be received in India.

The car had made good speed in the deserted London streets of early morning, and they now entered Belgrave Square. Two other cars were drawn up outside the house which was their objective, and one of them Robin recognized as belonging to Sir Henry. They drew up behind it, and Robin and the Frenchman jumped out.

It took a moment or two for the rough-looking Colonial and the old man to establish their identity at the door, but very soon they were in the house. They were directed straight up to the room which had been used by Molgistan as a bedroom and in which his body now lay.

The sight was gruesome. The bed was saturated in blood: the poor man's throat had been slit from ear to ear, and the knife which had done it was lying by the pillow. But, not content with this death-dealing blow, the assassin had plunged a second knife into the heart. The hilt, splattered with red, was plainly visible sticking out from the body.

"Lemoine!" breathed Robin.

Deschamps looked at him sharply.

"Yes, my old." The Frenchman spoke very softly. "That is undoubtedly the work of Lemoine. I have seen many men killed like that, twice almost! Two knives, one to cut the throat, the other to plunge into the heart up to the hilt."

"The murder of Sanderson was committed by Lemoine," said Robin quietly. "That was one of the Sunday murders which made Tudor, Brand, and Sir William Blandyce suspect the existence of the Vulture."

"I was at the Sûreté when Scotland Yard wired," replied Deschamps. "Lemoine has been doing this for a year in the Apache quarter of Paris. Quite lately he disappeared from France."

"We'd better have the knives taken to the Yard and examined for finger-prints."

Deschamps smiled.

"Most certainly, we must leave unturned no stone. But you will find none. I myself had the investigation of three Lemoine murders and not once did I find any finger-prints on the knives or on anything else. He is far too clever, is that Lemoine!"

"Yes!" Robin smiled a trifle ruefully. "But even so we must try it."

They left the room after Robin had given a few rapid instructions to a detective-inspector in charge. They were then conducted to a room upstairs.

Sir Henry was standing at the door, his face livid and shining with sweat in the artificial light.

"For God's sake, Robin, tell me what's happened to them!"

His voice sounded so awed that Robin looked at him in blank astonishment. But the elder man impatiently pointed to within the room. An inspector was standing just inside.

Deschamps followed Robin into the room. Four bodies were stretched on the floor, the bodies of men of magnificent physique. The head of each was covered by a cloth.

"We found them lying all huddled in a heap in that corner, Mr. Murdoch," remarked the inspector woodenly.

Robin looked at him, astonished at the quavering voice which he knew to be foreign to this excellent police officer. He saw again a livid face, and beads of perspiration on the forehead.

"Good God!" said Robin to himself. "The devil himself must have been in this house to-night! What on earth has happened?"

He advanced to the nearest figure and gently lifted the cloth.

Robin sprang back in amazement. For a long minute he stood swaying, wondering whether he were going to faint, wondering whether his senses had left him and his eyesight was playing him ghastly tricks. For the man lying there had no skin to his face, and no flesh. The bone of the skull even seemed to have been burnt away by some horrible acid. Robin at once thought of vitriol, but dismissed the idea almost immediately; the thing which had attacked these unfortunate men was manifestly far stronger than anything as yet known to scientists. Something had eaten through the skin, eaten into the flesh, and had started gnawing into the skull itself before its power was exhausted. Robin felt a wave of acute physical sickness as he gazed fascinated at the nauseating spectacle.

A figure passed him and knelt by the body. It was Deschamps. Robin wondered at the Frenchman's self-possession that he was able to approach so near to the appalling horrifying corpse.

But then full power over his senses returned to him; he realised his wonder to be weakness, his first moment of nausea to be, even though involuntarily, nothing but a shirking of his duty. He also approached the still figure and knelt by Deschamps.

"What is it? What can have done it?" he murmured.

"God, He only knows." Deschamps spoke very softly, almost in a whisper. "And perhaps the devil. No one else."

Very slowly, very carefully, Deschamps removed the covering cloth from the next figure, but quickly returned it. He did this again to the other two; each of those four members of the Maharajah's bodyguard had been treated in precisely the same way, each had suffered his face to be burnt away, burnt to the bone, burnt even beyond into the marrow.

"Torture!"

"No." Deschamps spoke swiftly. "It was not torture. The acid—the poison or whatever it was—has ceased to burn for some time. The action must have been almost—what do you say?—almost . . ."

"Instantaneous?"

*"Oui, oui, c'est ça!* Instantaneous. Death came at once. You can see that because of the hands. There are no clutching fingers. It is as if the brain ceased at once, on the moment. What do I think, my old? I will tell you. The Vulture in some way made the stuff reach the faces of all four of the men at one and the same time. Death came to each at once and about the same moment. A doctor will say so too—will confirm what I say. But there is no need for a doctor to tell us this—we know it. Had it not been so there would have been sounds—shrieks of agony, groans, yells for help. But no sound was heard, or the rest of the Maharajah's suite would have come to see what it was."

Robin suddenly realised that they were talking in whispers. Despite the gruesome objects before his eyes, he smiled to himself at the awesome power which these four corpses were wielding over all those present. He replaced the cloth over the mutilated man and rose to his feet; he wiped the sweat from his forehead with his handkerchief.

"We can do no good by staring at them," he said aloud. "Come on, Deschamps! An examination of the room."

The pair set to work with a will: every nook, every corner, every square inch of floor, wall and ceiling did they examine. But not one clue could they find, not one suspicious mark, no sign of any sort. The murderer, or murderers, had done their work well, and left no trace of their presence.

Deschamps suddenly straightened himself at the other end of the room.

*"Mon cher,"* he said, "let us leave this routine work to those who are accustomed to handling it." He glanced meaningly at the impassive inspector by the door. "Let us in the meanwhile have a short conference with Sir Secretary."

Robin agreed. The representatives of the Yard, trained for the work, would not omit to notice quite a lot which he, at any rate, might miss.

"Very well."

They left the room to find Sir Henry waiting for them.

"A little talk, Sir Secretary, in private."

"Certainly."

They moved into a small room and sat down round a table, with the door shut and a plain-clothes man outside.

"Well?"

Sir Henry's voice was very serious.

"Where are the rest of the Maharajah's suite?"

"Locked up downstairs." For the first time Sir Henry smiled. "I'm taking no risks, Robin. Those four men upstairs were killed by something—some virulent poison or acid—which we of the West don't know. That much you can see at a glance. It occurred to me, therefore, that the visit of the Vulture might have taken place from the inside, so to speak. Lemoine was certainly introduced to do the knifing, but . . . well, we have the Raubvogel's own word for it that the Vulture is an adept at disguise. If this is so . . . he can easily disguise others. I shall have every one of those Eastern men downstairs scrubbed. If that yields nothing, I shall have their skins tested for dye. I'm blowed if I'm going to let any of the Vulture's men get away should I have had the good fortune to have nabbed one with the rest downstairs."

"Bravo!" said Deschamps. "But have you asked them questions?"

"Interrogated them? Most certainly I have."

"And what did they say?"

"That they heard no sound at all throughout the night from the moment at which they retired to bed to the moment when they were waked by the invasion of the police. They are unanimous on the point. They are all frankly terrified, or appear to be so, and are appalled at the disaster."

There was a long pause. Sir Henry leant back in his chair and stared at Robin and the Frenchman, evidently wholly reliant on them. Deschamps, in his guise of a very old man, looked strangely incongruous, smoking a cigar and leaning back in his chair. Robin, puffing at a cigarette, wondered what on earth was going to happen next.

At every turn this Vulture seemed to be too good for them. At every turn their plans were not only baulked but altered so that they became not merely harmless to him but a positive hindrance in the pursuit of the master criminal. The man was amazing; he knew every step that was to be taken against him almost before it was thought of, his organisation dealt with it so as to turn it to his own advantage. A feeling of hopelessness came over Robin.

"How on earth did he get in?" he asked.

Sir Henry grinned unpleasantly.

"If I haven't got him downstairs," he said, "and I shall soon know, because my men are at work on those people already, then I can offer no suggestion as to the method. I had my fellows outside watching every man or woman, child or dog, that entered this house yesterday evening and during the night. None have done so—absolutely none. At the houses on either side they have, but that's no use. The Maharajah arrived at this house, entered with his lot, and closed the door. It was not opened again after that. Nobody came out or went in."

"Extraordinary!"

Robin looked at the Frenchman.

"It is extraordinary," he said, "and what about the pearls?"

Sir Henry gave a short, bitter laugh.

"He's got away with them all right," he said, "and everything else, if there was anything else which we have every reason to suppose. I . . ."

There came a knock at the door.

"Come in!" cried Sir Henry.

A police inspector entered.

"Telephone message from the Yard, sir. No finger-prints or any marks at all on the knives sent over for examination."

"Thank you."

The man retired. Robin looked across at Deschamps and saw that he was smiling gently, as much as to suggest that he had known all along what the result would be.

"It's ghastly!" burst out Robin.

"Precisely how bad that is I do not know," said Sir Henry quietly, "but I should say that it was a good deal worse than that. It is a most serious matter for the Empire."

"For the Empire? How?"

Deschamps spoke anxiously.

"In this way, Monsieur Deschamps. Molgistan was known to be a man of very doubtful loyalty to the King-Emperor. Great things were hoped from this his first visit to this country. We hoped that we might be able to teach him the influence of the Motherland and its power. Now, of course, we cannot, but that does not matter so very much. What does matter is the impression which his murder will make on the inhabitants of Molgistan, who are his subjects. Accustomed themselves to riot, to murder as a justifiable political weapon, they will jump to the conclusion that their Prince was killed because of his political views. But they have been taught for years that their rulers, the British, do not do that sort of thing. When they are told that their Prince was murdered by a robber and that we did our best to protect him, they will laugh at us. And knife us the next moment our backs are turned. My God! I wouldn't care to be a white man in Molgistan the day after to-morrow!"

"But you must keep it secret!"

Sir Henry answered very seriously.

"For a little we can. Perhaps a day or two. But not much longer. The public here will want to know what has happened to their dusky visitor. There will be questions asked. Rumours will start flying about. Ye gods! Curse that Vulture! Curse him, I say, for the foul fiend that he is!"

"Steady, sir, steady."

Robin's even voice broke in upon Sir Henry's outburst.

"I'm sorry, Monsieur Deschamps. I'm sorry, Robin; you are quite right, my lad. Nothing is to be gained by even a moment of despair. But I wonder if you two quite understand what this means? For a day or two we can keep the thing hushed up, but no longer, and when it is made public then the whole truth must be told. Everything which is even remotely connected with this Indian Prince's death must reach the papers. His refusal to accept protection, the protection which we gave him in spite of this refusal and without his knowledge, and the individual protection which we tried to give him and which so nearly resulted in your death at the hands of the Raubvogel, Robin."

He paused for a moment and wiped his eyeglass.

"And what will happen then?" suddenly he continued. "Why, the public will realise the power of the Vulture. For a few hours perhaps all that this means may not be fully understood, but only for a few hours.

Then the public will realise how completely powerless we are—its revered Scotland Yard—to protect it from the ravages of this monster, and then will come panic."

He paused again; then suddenly he leant forward.

"Do you know what a public panic means, Robin? Do you, Deschamps? It means the crippling of trade, the undermining of the efficiency of the nation. This may sound absurd, far-fetched, perhaps, to you two sitting here, but I know. I tell you, I know. People will rush from London, all the people who matter, who must remain to keep the life flow in the veins of the City. All the very rich men. They'll fly the country with their money. Why? Because, not unjustifiably, they will recognise in themselves probable future victims of the Vulture!"

Sir Henry sat back in his chair, beads of perspiration glistening on his forehead, making their appearance possibly from the whole-heartedness with which he had thrown himself into his tirade, possibly because of the horrifying picture which his words had conjured up. He brushed them away impatiently with a white silk handkerchief.

Robin had sat quite still, silently listening to the dreadful truth as it was pictured to him by Sir Henry. There could be no two questions about it; the Home Secretary had put his case concisely and clearly, and he was right. He had hinted how grave would be the consequences of any violence to the Maharajah in his interview with Robin on the previous morning, but now for the first time the young man was able to visualise the full seriousness of the situation.

"I would not mind so much," continued Sir Henry quietly, "if we could have laid hands on this Vulture. Then at least we could have produced him, tried him, executed him, and there would have been no panic. We might have found it difficult to convince the inhabitants of Molgistan that the Vulture was not a scapegoat hired by the Government for the purpose of destroying their Prince, but still, that would have been a very much easier matter with which to deal. Now we can only say that he was murdered: of course, they won't believe us. And the country will go into a panic; there are signs of trouble already since that letter from the Vulture which was published."

There was a long pause.

"How long can you keep this quiet, sir?"

Robin put his question abruptly.

"I've already told you!" replied Sir Henry irritably, "a day or two—no longer."

"That means that in at any rate not longer than two days, the Vulture must be laid by the heels?"

"It does."

Again the serious-faced man relapsed into silence.

"We must do it then," said Deschamps suddenly.

"We shall do it," said Robin quietly.

"It's all very well to talk like that!" said Sir Henry, "but we've had high hopes before and they haven't gone for much. We thought a great deal of our plan for this evening, but the only thing we have succeeded in doing is to nearly lose you, Robin. We have been made fools of at every turn, and yet you tell me quite confidently that you are going to catch him in two days! Don't be an idiot!"

Robin grinned.

"Idiot or not, I mean it. It's got to be done; it shall be done."

The Home Secretary looked at Robin in surprise. It occurred to him that the frightful experience through which Robin had been that evening might possibly have turned his head. He was about to suggest that the youth had better go back to his club and get a little well-earned rest when there came a knock at the door.

"Come in."

An inspector entered.

"All the men and women downstairs, sir, have been examined thoroughly. There can be no question that they are all genuine members of the Maharajah's suite."

"Damn!"

Sir Henry, so bitter was his disappointment, so far forgot himself as to swear.

But a moment later this crushing blow was forgotten. A young inspector rushed into the room, brushed unceremoniously past his superior and stood before Robin.

"I've found a line on the Vulture at last, Mr. Murdoch! Will you come and have a look?"

## CHAPTER XVII

ALMOST before he had completed the words all three men were on their feet.

"Where?" said Robin.

"Up at the top of the house, sir."

"Lead on!" said Robin shortly.

They followed the inspector from the room and up the stairs. It was very dark; the house was an old one and ill-lit, but they moved rapidly. Sir Henry, panting slightly, brought up the rear of the little procession.

They reached the top landing, directly beneath the roof. An old box room stood on the left, two smaller rooms on the right. Above them was a skylight.

"Up there, sir."

"Where?"

"The skylight, sir. It's been tampered with. If you'll climb up and have a look you'll see that it was opened forcibly. That's the way the brutes got in, sir."

"Oh!" said Robin quietly. "I see. I wonder we didn't think of that before. An overhead charge, that's what they produced for our amazement."

He paused for a long minute deep in thought.

Somehow the others seemed to have assumed that he was the leader, for they made no move to interrupt his cogitations or to speak. Even Deschamps seemed subdued; his brow, the brow of the very old man that he was made up to represent, was furrowed. He also was thinking.

"If they came through that skylight," said Robin to himself, "they came from the roof. If they came from the roof they must have got there somehow. They couldn't have climbed up, because the house was being watched with lynx eyes both back and front. Very well, they must have come from the sides. But there are houses on both sides. Ah! I'm beginning to see it now! They came through one of these houses. No, I'm wrong. Not necessarily one of these houses but perhaps a house on the same line further away. To travel over a series of roofs is by no means difficult. Not too difficult for the Vulture and his birds of prey, anyway. I think an examination of the adjacent house agents' books might be interesting: a house recently taken in this square, not too far away from this one, and taken after it became known that the Maharajah had decided to occupy this house, might give food for thought—and possibly action, if I could trace the chap that took it. Heigh-ho! Are we on the track at last?"

"Are you going up to have a look, sir?"

The young inspector's voice broke in on Robin's thoughts.

"Eh? Well, is there anything to look at, Inspector? I mean beyond the fact that we have found the Vulture's method of entry into the house?"

The youth looked rather crestfallen.

"No, I suppose not, sir."

"Go up yourself and have another look," said

Robin kindly, "you may find something else on the roof, some trace of how the Vulture managed to reach the roof at all."

He turned on his heel and Sir Henry and Deschamps followed him. When they had got back to their meeting room, and the door was closed, Robin turnd to the others:

"I'm tired, desperately tired!" he said quietly, "and my head aches like fury. I don't see that anything else can be done to-night. To-morrow—quite a lot can be done, but not until to-morrow. I know that every minute is precious, but a fresh and active brain is required to grapple with this situation. What about meeting to-morrow and then getting going?"

Sir Henry looked doubtful.

"I agree," said Deschamps, "my head, she aches too. Sleep will do us all good, and clear our heads for to-morrow. In the meantime these officers," he swept his hand towards the door, evidently referring to the Scotland Yard men in the house, "will have tabulated all that they have found. We can then examine it. What do you say, Sir Secretary?"

Sir Henry sighed.

"I suppose you are right," he said, "but I loathe leaving this place."

"I think it would be wise all the same," said Robin, "a lot has got to happen to-morrow. And we must have all our faculties working overtime. Therefore let's give them the opportunity of a spot of rest while we can."

Sir Henry assented unwillingly. He felt that Robin was right, but he was desperately anxious and he knew that sleep was very far from him at the moment.

Deschamps rose to his feet.

"Well, I will retire. Good night, Sir Secretary, good night, my old. When do we meet to-morrow?"

Robin hesitated.

"What about my club at midday?"

"Midday!"

Sir Henry sounded scandalised.

"My dear Robin! We must get to work long before that!"

Robin looked at his watch.

"D'you know what time it is, sir? Nearly five o'clock. If we are to be even reasonably rested, we must have at least six hours' sleep. At least, I must. We can't do anything much before that anyway."

For a moment Sir Henry hesitated.

"What about midday at my club?"

Sir Henry laughed, albeit a trifle grudgingly.

"Very well, Robin. Have it your own way! Twelve o'clock at your club."

"Good." It was Deschamps who spoke. "Then until midday. Good night, gentlemen."

He left the room and closed the door behind him. Robin rose to his feet.

"Just one minute, Robin."

Sir Henry raised a hand in an arresting gesture as he spoke the words.

"What did you mean when you said that you would get the Vulture within two days?"

Robin looked at the Home Secretary with a quizzical smile on his lips.

"You said it had to be done, sir."

"I know I did."

"Well, it shall be done, sir."

"That's no answer, Robin."

Robin laughed.

"I know it isn't. But I have a hunch, that's all. I believe that I can do it!"

"You won't tell me more?"

"Not at the moment, sir, if you don't mind."

For a few seconds Sir Henry hesitated.

"Very well, Robin," he said. "I'll trust you. And may God be with you!"

"Thank you, sir."

Robin moved towards the door. Then he turned for a moment.

"There's one thing I would like to ask, sir. Can you have those excellent fellows you were talking about down from Edinburgh by to-morrow—I mean to-night?"

"That shall be done, Robin."

"Good. Thank you again. Good night, sir."

"Half a minute. I'll come along too."

The elderly man and the youth, having given final instructions to the Scotland Yard men who were being left behind, emerged into the square. It was almost light, and the London sparrows were chattering away happily enough in the garden. But neither Robin nor his companion said another word as they walked to the waiting car.

"I'll give you a lift, Robin."

"No thanks, sir. I need a spot of fresh air; a little walk will do me good."

"Right. Good night, Robin. Good luck."

"Good night, sir."

Robin Murdoch set off towards his club. He walked rapidly, deep in thought. It did not take him long to reach the great portals. The night porter grinned upon seeing him, and Robin realised that he was still in the clothes which he had thought to resemble those of the gentleman from the Dominions whom he had been impersonating. So much had happened during that night that he had completely forgotten such a small matter as his attire.

Robin went straight up to his room, and quickly took off the rather rough and ready suit which he was wearing. But then, instead of removing the rest of his clothes and retiring to bed as he had announced to Sir Henry he proposed to do, he pulled on a dark suit and over it he donned a light overcoat. Pulling a soft hat well over his eyes, and slipping a small automatic into his pocket, he made his way downstairs again.

But instead of leaving the club by the front door through which he had so recently entered, he continued down the stairs into the basement and walked through the deserted kitchens.

He found himself at the back door, the servants' entrance of the club. This was locked and bolted, but he withdrew the bolts and turned the key.

"I'm sorry if the club is robbed because of me," he said quietly to himself, "but I really can't help it. There's bigger game in the offing."

Arrived in the street, he looked quickly up and down, but at that early hour there was no one in sight. He set off briskly towards Belgrave Square.

It had not taken Robin long to reach the club from the square not so very many minutes before: it took him far less time now. He hurried for all he was worth, running when he knew himself to be unobserved, walking rapidly when there was any one in sight.

He rang the bell and was instantly admitted.

"Well?"

The inspector to whom he addressed the query, rather surprised at Robin's sudden reappearance, looked blank for a moment.

"Found anything?"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Murdoch. No, sir, nothing new."

"Which means nothing at all?"

The man hesitated.

"Well, sir, nothing except the marks on the skylight."

"Yes. Has that inspector who found them reported anything else?"

"No, sir. To tell you the truth, I haven't seen him."

Robin remained silent for a moment.

"I think I'll just go up and have a look round," he said suddenly.

"Very good, sir."

Robin left the man at the door and went quickly up the stairs. In a few moments he arrived at the top landing and found himself standing directly below the skylight. It had been opened and a ladder rested on it.

For quite an appreciable moment Robin stood still, his brow puckered, an anxious expression on his face. Then apparently he made up his mind and quickly ascended the ladder. He pulled himself on to the roof, stood upright and looked around him. There was no one, nothing unusual, in sight.

Robin bent down and examined the fastening of the skylight; there could be no question about it, the woodwork showed marks and there were scratches on the metal. Undoubtedly it had been tampered with.

"Odd!" said Robin softly, "this doesn't look like the Vulture's work. Is it possible that his men are getting overconfident and careless? Ye gods! I do hope so!"

He straightened again and once more looked round. Then he moved over towards the edge of the roof, towards the house which was next door. He examined the small dividing wall very carefully but could find no traces of any one having recently crossed it. But Robin was not satisfied: he climbed across himself and found that he was on a roof almost identical with the one he had just left. He moved along towards a spot where he calculated a skylight should be.

He found it, but it disappointed him. Obviously it had not been opened for years. Dust and dirt lay thick all round the edges, and with a sigh of regret Robin once more turned back. He climbed over the dividing wall again and made his way to the other side. Here also there was a low wall.

Daylight had now completely arrived, and Robin could examine the brickwork with ease. He moved carefully but quickly along the wall starting from the rear of the house. About halfway along he came to a sudden stop.

Robin knelt down by the wall and examined it very carefully. There were marks there all right, and they were recent marks. The top of the wall was scratched. Robin stood up and looked carefully at the surfaces of the roofs immediately opposite these marks.

He thanked providence that the recent weather had been bone dry. A certain quantity of London's dust had settled on these roofs, and there had been no rain to disperse it.

"Now is it your imagination, old lad, or is it not? Do you see the muddled imprint of shoes, or do you not? Shall we say that this is the result of the brandy they gave you when you came round, or shall we say that what you think you see is cold fact?"

But, even as he talked to himself, he was clambering over the low dividing wall and making his way silently yet swiftly, towards the place where he knew another skylight to be.

He came to it, and knelt down very gently. He examined it carefully. The operation took some time. Then, suddenly, Robin rose to his feet.

There was a curious light in his eyes, a curious flush on his face. It was the light and the flush of excitement, or perhaps of triumph. Robin stood stock-still, deep in thought.

"Well, that's the way they came in, anyway," he said half aloud; but his voice quavered ever so slightly. "I'll bet the National debt to a pyjama button on that score. Now, what to do. Do I proceed with the investigation? Do I follow into the depths of this house? On the whole, I think not. Not all alone, anyway."

He remained motionless for a few seconds.

"Ye gods, no!" he said suddenly. "Nobody enters for a few hours at all events. I've got a better idea than that!"

He turned, and was about to return the way he had come, when abruptly he came to a dead stop. Robin had chanced to look to his left, to look towards a chimney which reared its ugly head studded with pots for several feet above the level of the roof.

Robin's right hand slipped into his pocket, and came out a second later gripping his automatic. The youth could see a shoe, a sock, and covering that the lower portion of a pair of trousers. The rest of the person to whom the leg belonged was concealed by the chimney.

There was something very unpleasant about that leg. It looked twisted, unnatural, lifeless. Robin could feel a cold sweat breaking out about his temples, spreading on his forehead.

For a space of time which seemed to Robin an age but which could not have been longer than a few seconds, the youth stood motionless, scarcely daring to breathe, staring at this horrible sight. Then he realised that his movements on that roof had been fairly open, and that he must have been observed. He pulled himself together with an effort, and raised his automatic to the ready.

"Come out of there!"

Robin spat out the order viciously. Nothing happened; the leg did not move.

"Come out of that, blast you!"

Still the leg did not move.

"If you don't come out of there in about half a second I shall put a bullet into you!" said Robin purposefully.

The leg remained just where it was.

"Dash it!" said Robin to himself. "You'll have to go and look, old lad. Unpleasant, but necessary. Have you the courage? Yes. Come along then."

Robin suddenly ran forward and round the chimney. The moment he could see the owner of the leg, he came to an abrupt standstill. Then, quietly, he replaced the automatic in his pocket. He walked forward, and knelt beside the body. Very gently he pulled it over on to its back. Robin found himself staring into the lifeless eyes of the young police inspector who had first found the scratches on the skylight.

For one awful moment Robin felt panic creeping over him. He longed to rush madly back to the other roof, back to the open skylight and down the ladder to safety. But even as this feeling came over him he struggled for mastery and won the day. Carefully, sick at heart, he looked over the body for the cause of death.

He was not long in finding it. A very thin and long knife had been plunged into the luckless man's back.

Robin rose to his feet a trifle unsteadily. He had been much too near death himself that night to be able to stand too much in the way of gruesome spectacles, and there had been found too many in that house already. But there was one thing in the forefront of his mind.

"So the Vulture was here as recently as all that! After I had spoken to this lad. Poor devil! He must have . . ."

Robin stopped talking to himself and stared at the right hand of the dead man at his feet. The fingers were clenched. From between the first and second, Robin's quick eyes had noticed hanging a tiny thread.

At once the youth was on his knees again. Very carefully, very gently, he removed the thread and placed it in his cigarette case. Then, quickly and full of purpose this time, he rose once more and turned away.

Robin ran across the roof and quickly climbed the wall. A moment later he was worming his way through the skylight and was clambering down the ladder. He found the inspector in the hall.

"How many men have you got here, Inspector?"

"Only four now, sir."

Robin spoke breathlessly.

"Send the lot to guard the house next door. That one. Two in front and two behind. If any one attempts to leave it, they must arrest that person. If there's any resistance they must shoot. Is that clear?"

The inspector looked startled.

"Yes, sir."

"Ring up the Yard and get more men. All armed.

Force a way into that house and take every one found in it. And collect the poor devil who found the skylight marked. He's on the next roof. Dead."

"Dead!"

"Yes. Murdered. But don't touch him until the squad arrives. You stay up on the roof and keep guard. Shoot any one on sight. Understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"Right. Everything as quick as you can."

"Very good, sir."

"I'll be back shortly."

Robin reached the door, stopped for a moment with one hand on the door knob, then retraced his steps. For a few moments he engaged the inspector in earnest conversation; then he turned and left the house.

Robin's subsequent movements were mysterious but purposeful. He found a taxicab, the driver finishing his night shift and making for home, and managed to persuade the fellow to take him up to a house in Charles Road, Hampstead. Robin smiled to himself as he approached it but his smile was not mirthful, it by no means anything resembled that cheering expression which had done much to make the youth the darling of the Society into which his work had introduced him. There was something rather grim about it: Robin could not quite forget the scene in that ground floor sitting room only a few hours before. Involuntarily a shiver ran through his body.

He found the inspector who had been left in charge.

"Found anything?"

The man smiled ruefully.

"If it hadn't been for those cut wires, Mr. Murdoch, I'd never have known that there had been any one in the house. There's not a mark on the window either: are you sure he got at you that way?"

Robin laughed shortly.

"He must have," he said, "unless he can walk through walls. I was watching the only door all the time."

"It's amazing, sir. He has left no trace of any description. Before to-night I would have happily taken a bet that if I were given a house to look over and find out whether any unauthorized person had been in it or not, I would get the right answer. But I'm a bit shaken in that belief! If it hadn't been for those cut wires . . ."

He paused. Robin pulled out his cigarette case and offered one to the inspector. They both lit up and smoked for a moment or two in silence.

"You ought to be in bed, sir!"

Robin smiled.

"So ought you, Inspector! So ought we all if it wasn't for this brute of a Vulture!"

"I see. Still busy, sir?"

"Much too busy. I hoped you might have got some information for me here. You've examined the garden?"

"Every inch of it!" The inspector was frowning as he answered the question. "Every centimetre of the house as well! The man seems to have disappeared into thin air."

Again they remained silent.

"Look here, Inspector," said Robin suddenly. "Have you got a friend who'll keep his mouth shut in the Yard? I mean an inspector on another case altogether, nothing to do with the Vulture?"

The man thought for a moment.

"It's rather difficult at this time, sir!" he replied. "We're nearly all engaged in one way or another in chasing this Vulture. But there is one fellow, yes. Inspector Johnson, sir. We were called in to investigate a small matter in Hampshire and he was sent on the case. He's due back at the Yard this morning."

"Good! Now this is important, Inspector, I want you to take this thread"—very carefully Robin withdrew the small piece of thread which he had taken from the dead man's hand, from his cigarette case where he had secreted it—"and have it subjected to all the tests. In particular I want to know the true colour and if possible the colour of the suit of clothing which it came from. And I want to know soon: as soon as I possibly can. So will you tell your friend Johnson that he's got to incorporate this thread into his own case: as soon as he knows tell him to go out to a public telephone box and ring me up at my club and let me know what the experts say. But on no account must any one know that all this has anything whatsoever to do with the Vulture."

The inspector looked rather surprised.

"Very good, sir. I'll see that it's done."

He took the thread and put it away carefully in an envelope which he placed in his pocket.

"Surely, Mr. Murdoch, you don't think that there's any agent of the Vulture's actually in Scotland Yard?"

Robin realised that the man, although perfectly willing to obey his orders blindly, was a trifle hurt that any one should suspect the honour of Scotland Yard. He realised also that having taken the man so far into his confidence he ought really to enlighten him on the necessity for the precautions which he was now taking. Very briefly, and telling the inspector only the bare minimum, he explained the situation:

"It's like this, Inspector. We have every reason to believe that there is a leakage somewhere, and most unfortunately it looks very much as if it came from the Yard. I hope to goodness it doesn't, but I'm taking no risks. I'd be a fool to do so, wouldn't I?"

Robin smiled; the inspector melted before that smile.

"Of course you would, sir! Yes, I quite see. I'll arrange for it to be done as soon as I get back, and Johnson's just the man to keep his mouth shut."

"You'll make quite sure that he doesn't ring me up from the Yard, won't you?"

"You said from a public telephone box, sir."

There was just a suggestion of a rebuke in this answer. Robin smiled; he had evidently struck a good man.

"You're looking terribly tired, sir!"

Robin grinned.

"I feel it, Inspector. So would you if you'd had that Raubvogel's fingers into your throat!"

He paused for a second to light another cigarette.

"I wonder how long I was unconscious?" he said musingly. "Let me see: it was about half-past twelve or a quarter to one that the fellow made his appearance first. I don't know how long we talked. When was it that Monsieur Deschamps came down to find you in the cellar?"

"Nearly two, sir."

"Nearly two? Then we must have talked for longer than I thought. He only arrived in the nick of time, you know, or I should have been a goner!"

The inspector laughed shortly.

"I think he thought you were dead, sir, when he came down. He was in a terrible state! All jumpy and nervy!"

"Well," laughed Robin, "I don't altogether blame him, do you? He'd just seen the mess the fellow had made of me, he'd just been knocked flying, and for all he knew the Raubvogel might still be in the house!"

"Oh, yes, I know, sir. I'm not blaming him! For a froggy, I must say he's got great courage."

Which, coming from the rather narrow-minded quarter whence it did come Robin knew to be high praise. He smiled.

"I must be getting along, Inspector," he said, rising. "You'll see that the thread is dealt with soon?"

"At once, sir."

"And that I am told the result immediately?"

"Don't worry, sir. It'll be done."

"Right. Thanks very much."

Robin returned to the house in Belgrave Square with all possible speed. On the way he kept puzzling at a matter which seemed very obscure. Why on earth had the Vulture bothered to commit another murder, so soon after the others? Why had he killed the unfortunate inspector who had tumbled on to the method of his entry to the house? There were two possible reasons, or so Robin argued: the first that the fiend's lust for blood had been roused to boiling point already that night and that he had been unable to resist another victim who came so readily to the slaughter, and secondly that the inspector had arrived on the scene before the Vulture was ready for him, before the house next door had been completely evacuated and all signs of occupation erased. Of the two, the second was by far the most probable, for although the Vulture in his previous exploits had shown that he was delighted to kill just for killing's sake, yet he had also shown that he was by no means devoid of common sense. He was not one of those criminals so steeped in cunning that ordinary horse sense was submerged; and to kill the inspector merely for the pleasure of the murder was to ask for trouble.

Very well, said Robin to himself. If that were so, then the Vulture, or at any rate one or more of his birds of prey, had been in that house next door at the very moment when the Home Secretary, Deschamps and himself had discovered the dead body of the Maharajah and his mutilated bodyguard. But these atrocities must have taken place long before that moment; what could have delayed him so long?

Robin racked his brain for a plausible answer. It was possible that by the time he again reached Belgrave Square an answer would be forthcoming as a result of the raid on the house next door; but Robin had little hope from this quarter. The poor inspector had been dead for some time before Robin had found him, and his presence at a spot which had cost him his life would have warned the Vulture that he had no time in which to dally. Therefore he was almost certain to have gone long before the men from Scotland Yard had broken into the house. Something must have delayed the Vulture's men, something of very great importance for they were scarcely likely to have remained so near a house brim full of their sworn enemies, the police, for one second longer than they could help.

Robin, at this point in his reflections, arrived at the house in Belgrave Square. He quickly rang the bell, casting a quick glance at the other door so near. But it was firmly shut; Robin wondered if the raid had taken place or not.

The door was opened to him. He passed quickly through, and turned to the inspector.

"Well?"

The man shook his head despondently.

"I acted on your instructions, Mr. Murdoch. The men arrived from the Yard and we've been through every nook and cranny of that house. There wasn't a soul in it. Nothing at all to find, either. But I do think it's the house they came from, because the skylight was well oiled and had recently been opened."

Robin could not withhold a sigh of disappointment.

"We've removed Inspector Standing, sir."

"Standing?"

"Yes, the young man who was murdered."

"Oh, yes."

Robin remained silent, frowning at his thoughts. Suddenly he looked up at the man opposite him.

"You were in charge of the watching party, Inspector?"

"The watching party sir?"

"Yes. On guard to-night outside this house."

"Oh, yes, sir."

"Did you see people come and go from that house next door?"

The inspector became thoughtful.

"Well, sir," he said at length, "there were one or two. It looked like a dinner party. And later on a car drove up. In the early hours of the morning it drove away with a lady. I noticed that because it was a beautiful car."

"Would you know it again?

The inspector smiled.

"Scarcely, sir. These smart Rolls-Royces look pretty much the same. It looked rather like a lady's car: very smart and light colouring."

"I'd know it again, sir."

A young plain-clothes policeman standing by the inspector had spoken. A gleam of excitement came into Robin's eyes.

"You would? Well done, me lad. How?"

"I took the number, sir. Don't know why, but it impressed itself on my mind."

"Yes," said Robin gently. "What was it?"

"XY 50550."

Robin did not answer, he swayed slightly where he stood: in a moment the inspector had leapt forward and supported him; a chair was produced and Robin sat in it.

"What's the matter, sir?"

"Nothing! Nothing! That little incident with the Raubvogel I suppose. Just a moment of faintness."

The inspector looked serious.

"You ought to be in bed, sir. You must get some rest. You'll knock yourself up if you don't."

Robin pulled himself together.

"I'm all right now, Inspector."

But, although he had lied gallantly, Robin's mind was still in a whirl. For his moment of faintness had had nothing whatever to do with his rough treatment from the Raubvogel. He knew the number of that car, the car which had stood outside the house next door at just the crucial time. He had often travelled in that particular Rolls-Royce. It belonged to Louella.

# CHAPTER XVIII

WITH this appalling shock had come to Robin a true realisation of how very tired he was: he looked at his watch and found that it was just past seven: for nearly twenty-four hours he had been on the go and through circumstances more exciting than those of any nightmare. But now that the excitement had gone, and that action had given place to the comparative quiet of exercising his powers of deduction, Robin felt very far gone indeed. On top of this the ghastly blow about Louella's car.

Robin refused to think of it, metaphorically shut his eyes towards this damnable fact which had been jumped on him out of the blue. But he knew that he could only do this for a very little while. The situation must be faced: the Home Secretary had not picked his words when he had explained the state of affairs to both Deschamps and Robin, and the youth recognised only too well the terrible responsibility which rested on his shoulders. If Louella were a member of the Vulture's gang, then she must be run to the gallows with all the rest.

Robin shuddered. A mental picture rose before his eyes, and refused to be banished, of a slender and adorable figure, shaken with fear, staggering along the short walk necessary between condemned cell and execution chamber. Robin almost cried out in his agony of mind: he could see pictured before him the hangman's rope being slipped over the sweet face so that it was drawn close to the delicate skin of Louella's neck, he could watch the executioner's hand seize the lever and actuate it, he could hear a cry. Then nothing: just the silence of death.

But, as suddenly as this mood had come, so it left him. Robin sat up ashamed of himself and of his thoughts. He refused to doubt Louella. There must be some mistake, some absurd mistake. He turned to the waiting plain-clothes officer, standing respectfully beside the inspector.

"Are you sure that was the number?"

"Positive, sir. The figures sort of got stuck in my mind."

"Absolutely sure?"

"I'd stake my oath."

Robin tried another tack.

"What colour was this car?"

"Light blue, sir. Black wings and wheels and polished aluminum bonnet."

Yes, there could be no mistake. Robin had himself helped Louella to choose the colour scheme.

"But it can't be."

It was a cry, a bitter cry, to which Robin gave way; but he did not voice it aloud.

"Steady, old lad, steady!" Robin spoke to himself. "Don't get all wopsy-topsy, now! She wasn't in it probably. She can't have been, the darling! But . . . hell, it does require some explanation!"

He looked up.

"Well, I think I'll take your advice and get some rest. Nothing can be done now, can it?"

"No, sir. At least I can't suggest anything."

"Right!" Robin strove hard to keep his voice normal and even. "Well, if you find anything report straight to the Yard. They know where to get me."

He walked out. A police car was waiting for the inspector, and Robin borrowed it. He went straight back to his club. It had occurred to him that a bath and a shave would freshen him and make him less tired; he knew well enough that sleep was not due for him yet, there remained still a good deal of work to be got through. But a little freshening, and a spot of breakfast, would help a lot, and there was no longer any violent hurry for the work on hand.

He kept his mind as far as possible from all thoughts of Louella whilst he bathed and shaved. As far as possible, but that was not very far. A vision of her beautiful face, wearing a slightly wistful expression as if of gentle reprimand that he should doubt her, kept on recurring to him. Robin tried not to think about it—he had determined on his course of action. As soon as he had breakfasted he would go to Louella's flat and ask her for the truth. No other plan was possible for him; the slender girl, the darling of the theatre-going public, meant too much to Robin for him to stalk her, to try to catch her out as he was at that moment trying to catch out the Vulture. Until then there was no use in idle speculation.

But it was a hard matter for the youth to continue in this manner, quietly bathing and shaving with such a weight hanging over his head. All his happiness hung on the coming interview and he well knew it. The whole world might come tumbling on his head.

What would he do were she to confess? What could he do but . . . Robin checked these thoughts with a vicious oath. It simply could not be true, or alternatively there must be an explanation. That his adorable girl should have got mixed up with a crew so piratical as these vultures, seemed preposterous—yet her car had been at the house that night. How on earth had it happened?

"The girl wants looking after!" growled Robin to himself. "If she's not very careful she'll break me from my ideas about the theatre and make me marry her. Dash it! She can't be allowed to go gallivanting about London in the small hours of the morning and to consort with murderers and worse! I must put a stop to it."

He tried to grin to himself, but he found it desperately hard. Robin was on the verge of he knew not what, a desire to laugh and a desire to cry all rolled into one, but paramount a sneaking feeling that he would like to fly the country and forget about everything.

"But I can't!" He groaned. "I can't. I've so nearly got to the end of the riddle! Oh, why did your name ever get mixed up in this, Louella!"

It was after half-past eight by the time Robin had finished rather a frugal breakfast. He had forced himself to eat, for he needed sustenance badly, but it had been rather a struggle. His head was a prey to a dull ache and every bone in his body felt worn out. But he did feel slightly refreshed by the bath, strong enough anyway to carry on for the few hours more before his suspicions of the moment turned into conviction. And when that happened . . . well, there would be time enough to think of it then.

His first action after breakfasting was to walk across the road and enter a house opposite. Here he called upon a young man, disturbing that individual from a sound sleep. The conversation between them took about twenty minutes. Then, with a smile and a handshake, they parted.

Robin hailed a taxi and gave the address of Louella's flat. He paid off the man at the door of the great building, and ascended to the third floor. He rang the bell.

A smartly dressed maid opened the door.

"Why, Mr. Murdoch!"

"Sorry to surprise you at this hour, Rose. Miss Louella up yet?"

"No, sir. But she's awake; she's having her breakfast in bed. Shall I tell her you're here?"

"No."

Robin stepped past the girl into the small flat and closed the door behind him. He advanced towards a door at the end of the short passage.

"Sir! You can't . . ."

"Can't I?" said Robin, pushing the scandalised maid to one side. "Sorry, Rose, but this is important."

He opened the door and stepped into the room. A little shriek greeted him from the bed.

"Robin! How dare you! Leave the room this instant!"

The youth smiled. The picture which greeted his eyes sent his pulses throbbing and went to his head like wine. Louella, her hair in adorable disarrangement, was sitting up in bed with a tray on her knees. Fruit was on the tray, and a silver coffee jug. The girl had thrown a yellow silken dressing jacket over her shoulders: she made as pretty a picture, in the morning sunlight, as any man would wish to see, her eyes wide open in surprise, a slight frown of annoyance on her features.

"Robin! Will you leave at once or shall I have to burst into floods of tears?"

Robin laughed.

"I'm sorry, dear. There is a reason, though, and I'm rather in a hurry. I want . . ."

"Robin, you look awful!" There was real concern in her voice now; all the resentment had flown away. "And what on earth have you done to your neck?"

Involuntarily Robin put a hand to his throat.

"Nothing! I mean, quite a lot! But that can wait. Louella . . ."

"Darling, why are you looking like a ghost? What's happened? Oh, do go away for a moment. Go to the sitting room; I'll make myself a little less indecent and join you. Are you ill? Why are you looking at me as if I'd got a rash? Oh, please, what has happened?"

The words poured forth from the agitated girl. Robin longed to rush to her bedside, seize her glorious self in his arms and soothe her. But he couldn't . . . just yet.

"Darling, leave my room this instant!"

Her tone was now imperious. Robin turned to the door.

"Thank you, dear. I won't be a tiny minute. Tell Rose to bring you something. Anything you want."

Robin closed the door behind him. He found himself face to face with a very angry and rather frightened Rose.

"It's all right, Rose. Miss Louella's coming to talk to me in the sitting room."

It sounded rather lame, but what else could he have said? Robin was at any rate miles happier; he had got what he had wanted out of that sudden and entirely unexpected intrusion. Surely, argued Robin with himself, surely no girl with a guilty conscience could behave like that. "But she's a great actress!" said some suspicious devil within him. "She's got a reputation for acting second to none. You can't trust that type!" "Damn actresses!" said Robin to his devil, "I trust the darling, anyway. Go right back to your hell." He sat down by the window in the sitting room.

Louella was as good as her word. She appeared in a very few minutes, looking more attractive than Robin had ever before seen her. She had slipped on some form of garment which seemed to be made of various silks of the palest shades: she had donned a pair of stockings although she was wearing her fluffy slippers. She had hurriedly brushed her hair into place, but one rebellious curl still adorned her forehead. It seemed to Robin that Louella had borrowed something of the freshness of the morning.

"My dear, have you been drinking?"

Robin threw back his head and laughed: it sounded so absurd, so ridiculous after the events of that awful night.

"Don't laugh at me, darling!" Louella's voice was gentle, but held a touch of reproach. "I'm trying to make excuses for you. And you do look so weird! What on earth are those horrid marks on your throat?"

"Listen, Louella," Robin spoke in deadly earnest. "All this I'll tell you later—when I have time. But I haven't hurt myself . . . much. I'm terribly sorry for what I did but I do still think that it was necessary and I haven't been drinking! Will you take all that on trust?"

The girl hesitated for one moment.

"Yes," she said softly. "As a matter of fact, Robin, you could tell me anything you like and I'd believe you."

Robin took one of her hands in his and raised it to his lips.

"Thank you, dearest. Who did you lend your car to last night?"

Abruptly Louella withdrew her hand and sat bolt upright in her chair. Robin, watching her intently, saw that she flushed ever so slightly.

"That's what I should like to know."

"What you'd like to know?" Robin was startled.

"What do you mean, Louella? This is terribly important, dear. Don't answer in riddles."

"I'm not answering in riddles. I mean exactly what I say. That's precisely what I should like to know."

For a moment Robin stared at her. She smiled and leant towards him.

"Robin, darling, I didn't sleep well last night. I had awful dreams: I dreamt that people, horrible people, were clutching at me as I lay in bed, and that their fingers when they touched my skin burnt into my flesh. I was terrified out of my life; I kept on waking in a cold sweat. I don't exactly know what time it was, but I think it was just before dawn this morning when I couldn't stand it any longer. Every time I went to sleep, you see, these dreadful dream people came back to torment me. I longed for somebody to talk to, but I didn't like to wake up Rose; so then I thought that perhaps a little fresh air might do me good."

She paused, and slipped one hand back into Robin's.

"Go on, dear."

"So I went to the window and sat on the sill for a little, looking up at the stars. They seemed to be company, somehow. They winked down to me, and tried to tell me that I was only a silly child and that really there was nobody to clutch at me with red-hot fingers. They were lovely last night, Robin! Did you notice them?"

Robin grinned.

"I saw some," he said shortly, "but I doubt if they were the same ones. Yes, dear; what happened next?"

"Well, while I sat there getting up enough courage to go back to bed, I suddenly looked down at the street. I don't quite know why, but I did. I saw a very strange thing."

Unconsciously Louella had lowered her voice; Robin leant forward the better to hear her.

"I saw a car, exactly like mine, come up to the door. I couldn't believe my eyes for a minute; then it occurred to me that it must be somebody else's painted just the same as mine. I distinctly remember feeling a moment of irritation that somebody else should have thought of the same colours, and then it passed, and I watched the girl get out. She paused for a moment and said something to the chauffeur; then she came into this building. The car drove off."

"It was your car, Louella."

"I know it was; but don't hurry me, darling. I left the window and I thought that I'd like to eat an orange or something. I knew there were some in the fruit bowl in the sitting room—in here. So I came in and I took one from the bowl. But as I did so I heard an unexpected sound—at that hour of the morning—somebody was putting a car away in the mews down below. As you know—now!—this room looks over the mews and my bedroom looks over the front of the building. Well, I went to the window—here"—she rose to her feet and led Robin to the bay window—"and I looked out. Then I realised that I needn't have bothered about somebody pinching my colour scheme—you see, I saw *my* car being put away in *my* lock-up."

She stopped, and for a moment or two looked at Robin with a little frown puckering her forehead.

"Have you a cigarette, darling?"

"Of course I have. I'm so sorry, dear."

Robin repaired his omission, and held out a match for Louella. Then:

"What did you do?"

"I used a most unladylike expression," said the girl with a dazzling smile, "and just to make quite sure that it had relieved my feelings I repeated it. Then I ate my orange and went to bed. It seemed only too obvious what had happened."

"Oh!"

"Of course. Dent must have either been out for a joy ride, or else he has been making a little money on the quiet by hiring out himself and my car by night after I've finished with him. I've got a good deal to say to Mr. Dent this morning."

Robin smiled to himself at the thought of the worthy Dent, excellent chauffeur whom he had known for some time in Louella's service, and of what he would have to say. But then, all at once, Robin became serious again: was this a heaven-sent opportunity to allay all Louella's suspicions, at the expense of the worthy Dent of course, and keep her out of the whole affair? He knew that the girl would expect him to answer any questions which she might put in the same spirit of frankness as she had answered his. Of the truth of the tale which she had just told him he had no doubt at all and he cursed himself for being no sort of friend in emergency since he had ever entertained doubts as to her honesty. "That little wrestling turn last night must have upset my equilibrium!" he said to himself. "Blast the Raubvogel! I've got a special grudge against him now for having made me doubt my darling!"

"I wonder which he did," suddenly said Louella musingly, leaning back so that her head was framed by a cushion, "and how long this has been going on? I don't quite understand the girl. It was too dark to see how she was dressed but she looked quite smart. And she wasn't sitting in the front with Dent; she left the car by the other door, the door to the back. Otherwise I must say that I would have suspected a joy ride, possibly with Rose. They seem quite good friends, and that would explain the girl coming to this block of flats. That's what I think so odd."

So did Robin. But abruptly, almost as a blinding flash, an idea came into his head. "Good God!" said Robin to himself. "Good God! It fits, old lad! At least it's beginning to fit!"

Louella suddenly rose to her feet.

"I think I'll put a few leading questions to Rose!" she said and moved towards the bell.

"Wait!"

Robin's voice held command: Louella stopped and looked round in surprise.

"Why? Don't you want me to?"

"No."

Louella returned to the settee.

"Robin, what's all the mystery? Why those horrid marks on your throat? Why the unusual pallor, why the sudden interest in my car?"

She paused.

"And why," she continued quietly, "your strange behaviour this morning, and the fact that you knew my car had been used without my authority last night?"

Robin seated himself beside her and took one of her hands in his.

"Louella dearest," he said, "that's an awful lot of 'Why's' to answer, isn't it? You've been very good and patient with me, so I'll do my best to tell you. But there are one or two things which I can't speak of at the moment so you must still be a little patient if you will, dear?"

Louella did not answer for a few moments; she stared at Robin straight between the eyes. The youth felt profoundly uncomfortable; he had the curious sensation that the beautiful girl before him was looking through his eyes into the innermost workings of his brain beyond.

"I suppose all this is connected with the Vulture?"

"Yes," admitted Robin quietly. "It is."

"And those marks on your throat, not to mention the fact that you look as if you hadn't slept for months, all that means that you got into touch with him last night?"

"Well—yes. With some of his men, at any rate."

For a few seconds she said nothing. Then suddenly, impulsively, she laid both her hands on Robin's shoulders.

"Robin, my darling. Please, *please* be careful. You know, it means such an awful lot to me!"

"Louella, dearest!"

But the next instant this strange moment had passed; both Robin and the girl felt ashamed, as people do who have laid bare their souls.

"It's quite all right, you know," went on Robin with a cheeriness which sounded terribly forced even to him. "They didn't get me, that's the great point, And, by heavens, they won't! Instead, I'm going to get them!"

"Oh, Robin! Are you sure?"

"Listen, Louella. I've been on the track now for some hours. I was completely wrong before, but now I'd stake everything I have that I've found the right man. Only I can't hurry things too much. In a day or two, perhaps, everything may be over and I think I will have won. Louella—" Robin hesitantly took her hand in his again, "Louella, if . . . if I do succeed, will . . . will . . . Oh, God, I mustn't!"

"Why not?"

Her voice, very low, came distinct to Robin.

"Oh, because you're too young, too fond of the theatre, too . . . too fond of your glorious freedom!"

"Isn't that for me to say?"

Robin paused and looked at her.

"I'm sorry, dear. I think I'm a bit weak still." He spoke determinedly. "Louella, I don't want you to say a word to Dent or to Rose. With a man so powerful as the Vulture one never knows who may be in his pay. We'll round up the whole lot when we've got *him*. And by God, I believe I'm close on his heels, now already! Will you forget, temporarily at least, all that you saw last night?"

The girl hesitated.

"All right, darling. If you say so. But it's absurd to suspect Rose. She's been with me for . . ."

"I know!" Robin spoke quickly. "But let me give you just a small example. You'd think that every one at Scotland Yard was to be trusted, wouldn't you? Well, there's a snake in the manger, or whatever it is, even there. But I think I now know who it is. You see? One must be on one's guard."

"Very well, dear."

Louella spoke submissively.

"But there's one thing I should like to know!" she said suddenly. "How does my car come into it? What was Dent doing?"

"For Dent's sake," replied Robin very seriously, "I sincerely hope he wasn't driving the car. If he was he's for it. There was a murder last night, Louella. And your car stood outside the door of the house used by the murderers just at the crucial time."

"Oh, Robin! Was it the . . . Vulture?"

"It was."

Robin got up.

"Much as I loathe leaving you, dear, I must get back. I'll see you again soon—very soon, I hope. Be a good girl!"

Louella smiled.

"I'll try!" she said.

He left her then, and made his way back to his club in a much more peaceful frame of mind than when he had started out that morning. But it is doubtful whether he would have enjoyed this peace had he heard Louella's softly spoken words as he closed the door of her flat.

"Very well, Robin, my dear. If you will keep me out of all the fun, and if you won't tell me things, then I'll have to go and find out for myself!"

# CHAPTER XIX

ROBIN got back to his club at about half-past ten, and his first action was to put through a telephone call to Paris. He was surprised at the speed with which he got his number: his conversation was short and to the point. He hung up the receiver with a satisfied smile on his face.

Then he wandered into one of the public rooms of the club and sat down to wait for the time appointed for his meeting with the Home Secretary and Deschamps.

Now that Robin had leisure for the first time that morning, he realised to the full how tired he was and how ill he felt. No wonder that Louella had remarked on his looks. If he looked as bad as he felt, then his appearance must be sad indeed. His thoughts took him back to that moment not an hour ago when Louella, to him the most exquisite lady in the world, had placed her sweet hands on his shoulders and practically confessed her love. For a few moments Robin allowed his mind to dwell on the subject, but then sternly he banished it from his mind. He had no right yet, he told himself, to think of Louella in that way—she was too young. Too full of her success at the theatre to settle down. As he had said to her, too fond of her glorious liberty.

Robin thought again, made himself think again, of the Vulture.

There was no use in thinking vain thoughts about Louella—that only unsettled him and took his mind off the work in hand. He thought of all that he had discovered in the last few hours.

The inferences pointed towards an amazingly daring and almost entirely successful effort on the part of this human bird of prey. But just one thing had gone wrong, and that one thing, with the help of providence, Robin hoped to turn so much to his own advantage that the Vulture and his whole organisation would come tumbling to the ground. That one thing—the murder of the unfortunate young Inspector Standing—had set Robin's astute brain working overtime. From the deductions which he had made other ideas had come, other ideas which he had now cross-checked until they were almost certainties. And then that visit of the early morning to Louella, that had produced another line of thought.

Robin looked at his watch. Only just after eleven. He had time to cross-check this last idea as well before Sir Henry and Deschamps were due for the council of war. Somewhat unwillingly Robin got to his feet from the comfortable armchair in which he was sitting; the idea of further action was repugnant to him in the extreme: he realised only too well that he was very nearly dead beat.

"Come on, old lad!" he encouraged himself. "You're very near the end now, with any luck. And the luck's been against you so far, so it's just about due to turn.

Only a little more effort. Have a spot of something before you set off. You will? Good. Waiter!"

A waiter approached.

"Large brandy and soda, please."

"Very good, sir."

Very soon the refreshment was brought to Robin.

"Splendid!" said he to himself. "Pity you don't like spirits, but still they're good for you. Especially at the moment. Well, good luck, old chap!"

Robin drained the glass.

He felt considerably better. Having found his hat, he had a word with the hall porter and left the club. He hailed a taxi. Robin then spent the next half-hour touring the countless house agents in the vicinity of Belgrave Square: each confessed to having had the house concerned through their hands, but each confessed also that they had not been responsible for any let. At last, just as Robin was about to give up the search, he found the right man.

Yes, they had been happy to complete an agreement less than a fortnight ago. Yes, the new tenant had taken possession, or so they believed. No, they regretted that it was not the custom of the firm to tell any stranger such things as the name of the new tenant. No doubt he could find out for himself if he called at the door.

Oh, the gentleman wished to see the senior partner? That was a difficult matter without appointment. The senior partner was a very busy man. It was very much doubted whether he would be able—the police? Scotland Yard? Why hadn't the gentleman said so before? Of course.

Robin found himself in the presence of a pleasant-faced grey-haired man. He gave away nothing but he demanded the name of the new tenant of the house in Belgrave Square next door to that taken by the Maharajah. The grey-haired man was delighted to oblige. Smith.

A man or a woman? A young lady. Could he give a description of the young lady? Certainly he could. Very fair-haired, slender of figure, a trim appearance. Attractive? Yes, distinctly attractive: this with a quiet smile which seemed to signify that the senior partner might have grey hairs but he wasn't very old in spirit, anyway!

"Thank you," said Robin.

"There's one other thing," said the senior partner, anxious to help authority, "she seemed very rich. Money seemed no object. She paid a preposterous premium without the slightest attempt to get it reduced. And she arrived at the office in an expensive car."

"A Rolls-Royce?"

"Yes."

"What day was this?"

"Let me see, now," the senior partner consulted a ledger, "on Wednesday. Not last Wednesday—the one before."

"Matinée day."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. Thank you very much indeed."

"Not at all." The grey-haired man rose to his feet.

"I hope nothing has gone wrong? I do hope nothing serious has happened?"

"Oh, no! Nothing at all. Good day!" smiled Robin cheerfully.

He could afford to be cheerful. The cross-check had worked.

Robin returned immediately to his club; he reached it just as the clock was striking twelve. As he entered the hall porter stopped him.

"A gentleman to see you, sir. He is waiting in the smoking room."

"Elderly?"

"No, sir. Middle-aged. A gentleman with side-whiskers."

"Ah!"

Robin thought of the statue of Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens and of the gentleman with side-whiskers who had led him such a dance on that occasion. He laughed at the recollection.

"What did you tell him?"

"That you would be down in a few minutes, sir. What you said, sir."

"Right. When an elderly gentleman arrives, bring him to me at once."

"Yes, sir."

Robin made his way to the smoking room. He looked around him, and saw Deschamps immediately. In truth the Frenchman looked rather conspicuous amongst the ordinary club members who were sitting all around him.

Robin approached.

"Good morning, old friend."

"Ah! my old. And the head, how is she this morning?"

"Quite gone," lied Robin. "The throat's still a bit dicky, but that's to be expected. And you?"

"Very much rested."

"Good. Sir Henry won't be long, but I think we have time for a small one. What's yours?"

Deschamps laughed.

"Well, if you insist! A Martini, please."

Robin hailed a waiter and ordered a Martini and a brandy cocktail. He was glad that the Frenchman had accepted his invitation, for he could not very well have drunk alone and he felt himself again badly in need of a fortifying drink. A good deal requiring a clear brain had to be done in the immediate future, and his brain was beginning to sag with fatigue. If there was one thing which Robin longed to do more than anything else at the moment, it was to retire to bed and get some rest and sleep.

The waiter brought the drinks.

"A toast, my old! To the downfall of the Vulture."

"And soon!" said Robin devoutly, raising his glass.

Deschamps replaced his cocktail on the table.

"You said a curious thing last night," he remarked suddenly. "You said to the Sir Secretary that you would have caught the Vulture in two days. Did you mean that?"

"Did I say that?" Robin laughed. "Perhaps I was a bit light-headed as a result of my little tiff with the Raubvogel."

"Did you mean it?"

Robin looked at the Frenchman squarely.

"Yes," he said, "I meant it. You see, old friend, the situation has become far worse all of a sudden. It was bad enough when Sir William Blandyce, Tudor and Brand were held captive and in peril of their lives: they are all friends of mine. But now the safety of the country is at stake—Sir Henry made that very clear last night, and he is right. What would you do if the safety of France depended on you?"

"I should—how do you say it?—move the earth and the heavens!"

"Exactly. And that is just what I propose to do. It's got to be done, that's all."

"Well, you will like the proposal that I have."

"Good. What is it?"

"That we . . . but here is the Sir Secretary."

Robin looked up. Sir Henry was being conducted towards them by a page boy.

"Good morning, Sir Henry. A little drink before we start?"

"No, thanks, Robin. I'm desperately busy. Where are we going to talk?"

Robin sat down again, having introduced Side-whiskers as Deschamps to Sir Henry's evident astonishment.

"Obviously we can't talk in this public room," he said quietly and deliberately. "Some one might overhear. I thought of my bedroom, but that's very small and we shouldn't be at all comfortable. Then I had a brain wave. I thought of my old friend Gerry Travers who lives just across the road. He ekes out a precarious living by photographing people—you know, he's a sort of artist johnny. I ran across this morning and asked him if his studio would be occupied to-day at twelve: luckily he said that it wasn't. So he cheerfully lent it to me: we most certainly sha'n't be overheard in there, and he's got some splendid armchairs."

"Good."

"Is it wise," asked Deschamps in rather a doubting voice, "that we should be seen crossing the street together? That Vulture, my old, he probably has spies everywhere. I am not sure . . ."

"I don't think it matters at all," said Robin quickly. "You are always disguised, Deschamps. I must say I think you carry it a bit too far at times, but I admit that it is useful at the moment. If you have any scruples you can always go back and become some one or somebody else as soon as we break up our meeting."

"You agree, Sir Secretary?"

"I think Robin is right. I don't think it really matters."

"Very well."

"Splendid!" said Robin rising. "Well, shall we go over?"

He led the way out of the door and across the road. They were met at the house opposite by a young man who took them to a room at the back of the flat. The room was got up as a photographic studio: light and dark screens and various systems of illumination were to be observed everywhere.

"I'm sorry, Robin," he said, "but you'll have to put up with artificial light. This room was built for the purpose—not to let in daylight. But at any rate you won't be disturbed."

"Good. Thanks awfully, old lad."

The youth shut the door behind him. The three seated themselves in the chairs which had been provided.

"Well?" asked Sir Henry.

Robin looked at Deschamps: Deschamps looked at Robin. It was the youth who answered the question.

"Monsieur Deschamps has a plan, sir," he said. "In point of fact he and I had a little chat before you arrived and we came to one definite understanding. Taking into consideration all that you said last night . . ."

"Just one minute, Robin," the Home Secretary smiled, "I'm sorry to interrupt, but you must know the situation as it stands at the moment from my point of view. I went to see the Prime Minister this morning and I told him the whole truth about last night. It shocked him considerably, which was not very surprising. I put my fears to him; he agreed entirely with what I said, which was practically word for word what I told you two last night. And finally I got him to consent to keep the matter quiet for twenty-four hours. He only agreed to this under pressure, and he would not allow one minute longer. So if you two are going to do anything, now is your chance and you have until midday to-morrow in which to act."

"Sir Secretary, we shall not require so long."

Robin looked at Deschamps in surprise: this was a new tone for the Frenchman to use. Deschamps laughed.

"I am not boasting!" he said, "but my old head, she has been working. I do not say that we shall succeed but we shall have a good, a good . . . go for it."

"Run for our money?" prompted Robin.

"Thank you, my old. Yes, a good run for our money. I look at it this ways: the profits of last night—the jewels and the pearls of the Maharajah—must be shared. The Vulture must divide them up among his followers. He must do it soon—why not to-night. You and I, my old, will go down disguised to the public house which we know to be the meeting-place. We will go down to-night. We know which door to watch: if they meet, we will raid them with Sir Secretary's Scotch policemen. We cannot now wait to find out first if there are any exits—we can only trust to luck. If they do not meet to-night then we must penetrate through the door and see what we can see. If we find anything we must follow it up. It is a desperate business perhaps; a . . . a . . ."

"Forlorn hope?"

"Thank you, my old. Yes, a forlorn hope perhaps. But . . . we have no other choice. And it is possible that it will be successful. What do you say?"

Sir Henry looked at Robin: the youth had a frown on his face and was deep in thought. Suddenly he looked up.

"Yes," he said. "I agree with you. I think it is our only chance, but I think it's a good chance. Does it satisfy you, Sir Henry?"

"My dear fellow!" the elderly man raised his hand, "it is not for me to say. You two are responsible for this business, and you must do what you think best."

"There's nothing fresh from the Yard, I suppose?"

"No," said Sir Henry. "Nothing. The Vulture left no trace of any kind in Belgrave Square, nor did the Raubvogel in Hampstead. But every single man employed at Scotland Yard is, unknown to him, having his history looked into. I am determined to get at the bottom of this leakage."

He paused, took a cigarette out and lit it. Then he looked at Robin.

"Robin, you ought to get some more rest if you are doing this raid to-night. Your sleep doesn't seem to have rested you at all. You look pretty bad, old chap."

Robin smiled.

"As a matter of fact," he said, "I feel infinitely better. But still . . . is there anything else to decide?"

"No, my old. You will come to eat a little food at my hotel to-night? And I will have the disguises ready. Bring only your little pistol."

Robin laughed. The Frenchman's description of the vicious automatic which he carried never failed to amuse him. But he hesitated for a moment before accepting the invitation: he had thought to go to Louella again and ask for the assistance of her deft fingers in disguising him. On second thought, perhaps it would be better not. Robin could not forget the look of anxiety in her eyes as she had asked him for the explanation of the angry marks on his throat: if he went to her again she could only guess that once again he was going into danger and that might disturb her. Better far that she should not know.

"Thank you very much, Deschamps. About eight o'clock?"

"Do not let us dine too early!" answered the Frenchman. "That only means we shall have a long wait afterwards. Come at half-past eight."

"Right."

"What about the police—the raiding party?" asked Sir Henry.

"Leave that to me, sir," said Robin promptly. "Just tell me where to find them."

"I'll write it down."

Sir Henry scribbled an address.

"I will tell the inspector in charge to take his orders only from you," he said.

"Good. Thank you, sir."

"And don't forget," added Sir Henry rising, "that I shall be at my house and waiting up until I hear from you. So that as soon as there is any news, good or bad, let me know."

"Yes, sir. Without fail."

Sir Henry smiled.

"Well . . . good luck, Robin. Good luck, Monsieur Deschamps. May heaven help you both against that fiend. And may God grant that you may be entirely successful to-night."

There was something rather solemn and impressive about the elderly man as he said these words. He moved over to the door, but did not immediately open it. Instead he turned and faced the other two again.

"And remember," he said very quietly, "that what you do to-night is vital to the safety of your country, Robin."

Deschamps sighed.

"I am impressed!" he said, "I am moved! That man, he loves his country. He is a great servant to it. *C'est bien, ça.* I take my hat off to him!"

Robin laughed.

"Well, old lad, is there anything more to fix up?"

"I do not think so."

"Neither do I. Until this evening, then."

They shook hands solemnly. Robin saw Deschamps to the street and into a taxi. When he had turned a corner and was out of sight Robin returned into the house.

"Well, Gerry?"

"Everything lovely in the garden, Robin."

"When'll you be ready?"

"About cocktail time."

"Right. Make it six-thirty."

Robin returned to his club. He at once went to have a quick lunch in the dining room. Just as he had finished a boy came up to him.

"Wanted on the telephone, sir."

Robin went to the booth. Who was that? Johnson. Ah! Yes? A grey suit, no doubt about it? None whatever. Splendid. Thank you so much, Johnson.

Robin went to his room. Robin got into bed. Almost before his head had touched the pillow Robin was asleep.

## CHAPTER XX

THERE came a rap on the door. Robin did not stir. There came another rap on the door, repeated, more insistent. Robin opened one eye and closed it again.

"Mice," said Robin.

Then he relapsed into unconsciousness again.

Gerry Travers, on the other side of the door, gave up rapping. He seized the door knob and let himself in. He closed the door behind him. He looked at the bed: Robin had almost covered himself with the sheet, but the top of his head was visible.

"The gentleman is tired," said Gerry.

He placed the package, which he had been carrying under his arm, on the table. Then he approached the bed and looked at the tousled head. For a moment he remained staring at his friend's face; then with a grin, he placed one hand on Robin's shoulder and gently shook him.

"Rats," said Robin.

"No," said Travers. "Only Gerry."

Robin opened one eye again, saw Gerry, and closed it quickly.

"Vermin," said Robin.

With a sigh Gerry Travers seized the sheet and pulled the bedclothes from off his friend.

"Pneumonia," said Gerry.

A sleepy Robin sat up.

"What?"

"Pneumonia," said Gerry, "if you stay there. Get up, you lazy hound. You said half-past six and I want a Bronx. Where is the bell?"

He found it, and rang. In the meantime Robin rose from his bed, immersed his head for a moment in a basin of cold water, and then, having brushed his hair, slipped on a dressing gown. The valet answered the bell, the drinks were ordered, and very shortly afterwards were brought to Robin's room. The waiter retired.

"Here's to you," said Robin.

"Glorious sunshine on your countenance," said Gerry. "He's come out beautifully."

"Really?"

"Don't you really me. Of course he has. Aren't I just about the leading photographer of the age?"

"I should say not," said Robin, "but still I'm no judge. I didn't like the last one you did of Louella."

"For the papers, old boy, for the papers. I know my market. They always like a spot of face smiling slightly vacantly over a spot of shoulder."

"Oh!" said Robin abashed. "I see."

"You don't see," said Gerry. "Nobody sees. It's inexplicable. But it pays so it doesn't matter. Yes, he's come out beautifully."

"Did you get him from all angles?"

"One-quarter, five-eighths, three-quarters, seven-eighths both port and starboard. Also full face. Whatever your photograph may be, we'll have the same.

And I've got the instruments as well. Look!" Gerry Travers opened his parcel and pulled out a pair of compasses and a rule. "We can measure with the utmost care. Gosh, Robin! But it was a bright idea of yours!"

Robin smiled. He was accustomed to his young friend's exuberance.

"I'm rather proud of it myself," he said. "It ought to settle the matter once and for all, although I must confess I haven't really very much doubt as it is. Gerry, push that bell again, will you?"

"With the greatest of pleasure," said Gerry Travers with a smile. "I think I'll stick to the same poison. Another Bronx, please!"

"Not on your life!" said Robin. "At least not yet. I don't want you doing your measurements with a more muddled brain than usual. No, I want to see if it's come from Paris yet. Should have. It was being expressed by air mail."

"Oh!" said Gerry in a disappointed voice.

The valet reappeared at the door.

"Will you please send down and ask if there's a parcel for me?" said Robin. "I expect one to have arrived expressed by air mail."

"Very good, sir."

A few minutes later the man reappeared with a sealed envelope bearing a French stamp.

Robin opened it as soon as the valet had left the room. There was a photograph inside, and a letter which seemed to be chiefly composed of measurements.

"Let's have a look at your efforts, Gerry."

The youth spread out several photographs on the table. Robin immediately picked out one.

"You've been lucky!" he said. "Here's the exact angle."

"No luck about it," said Gerry. "Pure foresight. The gentleman knows his business, that's all."

They laid the photographs together, the one which had come from Paris and the one which Gerry had taken. For the next twenty minutes neither spoke scarcely a word: both young men were absorbed in the work on hand. They made careful measurements with the pair of compasses and the rule, they noted the results. Finally they tabulated all that they had discovered on a piece of paper.

Robin picked it up and looked at it.

"Pretty conclusive, old lad, isn't it?"

Gerry laughed.

"There ain't no doubt at all. In spite of any disguise, these two are obviously not the same man. The eyes are wider apart, the forehead is less expansive. . . ."

"That last is no proof," said Robin. "It may be a wig."

"Just so. Sorry. But the eyes by themselves are proof enough. And the size of the mouth. That can't be faked."

"No, that can't be faked. You're quite sure you haven't made a mistake, Gerry?"

"As sure as I am that eggs is eggs."

"Because it's terribly important."

"Don't I know it?"

"Yes, but the smallest mistake makes a huge difference. What about going over it again?"

"Right. That might be wise."

Once again the two friends went over their measurements carefully. They did not compare each photograph the one to the other—that would have been useless. But they took the width of the eyes as compared to the width of the head, and found a figure to represent it: they took the length of the mouth as compared to the width of the face, and got another figure. Then they obtained these two figures for the other portrait: the figures were not the same for each photograph.

"Yes. Quite conclusive," said Robin shortly.

Gerry leant back in his chair.

"Satisfied?"

"More than satisfied. This is the last cross-check, and it has worked."

"Good. Well, what about the other half of that drink to celebrate?"

Robin laughed.

"Ring the bell, Gerry. You're nearest."

Shortly afterwards Gerry Travers, having done all that was required of him and had all that he required in exchange, left Robin to dress.

Robin, after his sleep, felt like a giant refreshed. The marks on his throat were no longer an angry red, although they remained to remind him still of a most unpleasant episode. His head had ceased to ache, and as he enjoyed a hot bath he felt that all the stiffness had left his body and that he was quite prepared for what might turn out to be a most strenuous evening. He dressed himself rapidly, and placing the weapon which Deschamps persisted in calling a little pistol in his pocket, he left the club and hailed a taxi.

He drew up a few minutes later outside the Home Secretary's private residence, and told the cab to wait. In a very short time Sir Henry came to the small study into which Robin had been ushered.

"Yes, Robin?"

"Sorry to disturb you at your dinner, sir."

"Don't be silly, Robin. As a matter of fact, we hadn't quite started. Cocktail?"

"No, thank you, sir. I've come round for instructions."

"Instructions? What instructions?"

"I want to know what to do, sir," Robin laughed. "I know what I want to do but I don't feel that I can take all the responsibility, sir."

"Well, what is it? Sit down. Smoke?"

"Thank you, sir. It's this way: You remember I boasted to you last night that I could get the Vulture before to-morrow?"

A curious gleam came into Sir Henry's eyes. He leant forward in his chair.

"Yes. Can you?"

"I'm not sure. I believe I can. I am in the position at the moment of being able to hand over to you somebody who, if he is not the Vulture himself, at any rate is one of his chief lieutenants. But, frankly, I don't want to. I want to give him a spot more rope. And I haven't any absolutely definite proof of his being mixed up in the murders personally, although I shouldn't be a bit surprised if he had directed them. What am I to do?"

"I don't quite understand, Robin. What do you want to do?"

"Well, at the moment I can spoke the Vulture's intelligence system. I can stop that absolutely. I know who it is in Scotland Yard who's been passing on Sir William Blandyce's plans and later our own. But . . . I want you to tell me not to. I want you to let me go through with the plan made by Deschamps to-night. If I do, then I have a big chance of getting, not only the Vulture, but also some, if not all, of his gang. Ridding the country of the whole nuisance in fact. On the other hand—it is a risk. I may be losing the advantage I have at the moment: I may lose it all. What am I to do?"

The Home Secretary rose to his feet. For a few moments he paced up and down the room without speaking. Clearly he was worried and in no way relished the decision which he must make. But, suddenly, he came to a stop directly in front of the youth anxiously watching him.

"Robin, you told me last night that you could lay your hands on the Vulture."

"I did, Sir Henry."

"Well, you have very nearly fulfilled your word. I mean you can cripple him badly if not actually get him. Don't misunderstand me, boy, but if I tell you to carry on as you wish, are the chances in favour of your getting the whole gang, or are they not? I know that I can trust you to answer truthfully."

Robin hesitated.

"About fifty-fifty, sir," he said.

"No better than that?"

"No better than that. But it's not so bad after all!"

Sir Henry came to an abrupt decision.

"No, it's not so bad, as you say. Carry on, my lad, carry on! But for heaven's sake, make no mistake."

Robin rose to his feet.

"Thank you, sir. Have you a piece of paper and a pencil?"

Sir Henry pointed to a desk. Robin sat down at it and wrote a note. He folded the paper and placed it in an envelope.

"Could you get this to the inspector in charge of the Edinburgh squad?"

"Certainly, at once."

"Good-bye, sir. Thank you very much, sir."

Sir Henry smiled.

"Good luck, Robin."

Two minutes later Robin was on his way to the hotel at which Deschamps was staying.

# CHAPTER XXI

LOUELLA arrived in her dressing room rather earlier than usual for the evening's performance. All the way to the theatre from her flat, where she had been having a quiet and lonely dinner, she stared at the back of Dent's head through the glass partition of the Rolls-Royce, and wondered exactly what his part had been in the strange and mysterious movements of her car on the previous night. How long had he been with her? Nearly three months. What sort of references had he presented for her inspection when she had engaged him? As far as she could remember, excellent. And she had liked him all the time that she had been employing him. It was all very odd: Louella was a young lady who went very much by her instinct in these matters—it had seldom failed her. She puckered her small brow and remarked to herself that it was all very odd.

What was it that Robin had said that morning? He had not been very explicit, but he had stated that a murder had been committed on the previous night and that her car had stood outside a suspected door just at what he had described as the "crucial" time. She had perused all the papers she could find that day—no mention was made of any murder. And the evening papers had been just as reticent: Louella did not quite know what to make of all this silence on the subject.

Was it because the affair was of such shattering importance that it was being kept a secret? Or was it because it was of so little general interest that in the opinion of the editors concerned it was not worth a paragraph? Louella smiled to herself: far more likely the former, for two reasons. The first that Robin Murdoch had behaved so strangely that morning and had evidently been labouring under some great excitement, and the second that, much as she might regret it personally, she knew well enough the insatiable appetite which the public never failed to exhibit for ghoulish details of a crime or of a tragedy. The most uninteresting murder in the world was always worth a paragraph.

Thought of Robin and his conduct brought a puzzled expression to her face: he had never behaved like that before, never acted in what could only be called such an uncharacteristically brutish fashion. At first, when she had realised the identity of the unannounced visitor to her bedroom, the thought had flashed across her brain that he was drunk. But then, noticing his appearance, the marks on his throat and the amazing pallor of his face, the impression had changed: she had thought him ill. And, accustomed as she was to take note of people and their actions, since at some future time she might have to portray similar circumstances in some play on the stage, Louella had seen nothing to alter that opinion: Robin had been ill.

But he had been in full possession of all his faculties for all that: he had been possessed that morning of a type of feverish activity both mental and physical. Only will power aided and abetted perhaps by the interest and excitement of the chase had kept him going. Louella found it in her heart to hope that since then the youth had been able to find time for rest. "For if he hasn't," said Louella to herself, "he'll break up sure as a blown egg can't withstand a steam roller. It's nature; every one can go just so far, but not one centimetre further. And Robin, the poor darling, looked to me to be pretty near that limit when he left this morning." Which was very true.

Louella sat down before her mirror and surveyed herself. "You know, Louella," she remarked to her image in the glass, "that boy wants looking after. He's got good looks, good brains and a great loyalty. Something was happening this morning in that brain of his, something which he hated. When he burst into your room, he was unhappy, suspicious. When you joined him in the sitting room he was relieved but anxious. Why? Obviously because of your car. He thought that you were mixed up with the Vulture; he wouldn't admit it to himself, but he was desperately unhappy about it all the same. Later he was happy in mind, but still desperately interested. I do wish he'd told you what had happened!"

She quietly commenced the business of making-up. Her thoughts had now taken a turn too private even for words to herself. He did want looking after so much: he ought to get married. And he wanted to get married. Ever so much. Louella almost blushed even in the privacy and solitude of her own dressing room.

He ought to get married to some sensible girl and settle down. But he wanted to marry her: he was deeply in love with her. The only thing that prevented him from saying so was . . . he had hinted at it this morning. She was too young, too full of her freedom, too fond of . . . her career and of the theatre.

Should she pass out of his life? Should she refuse to see him any more, making the break gentle by becoming more and more engaged and less and less accessible?

Louella suddenly threw the stick of paint which she had been manipulating, on to the table, and stared at herself in the glass.

"Face it, girl, face it!" she spoke softly, exultantly, for she already knew the answer. "Robin? or the theatre?"

Louella stared without speaking for a long time. Then, suddenly she turned in her chair.

"Annie!" she called.

"Yes, miss?"

Her dresser came into the room.

"Is Mr. Morton in the theatre?"

"I don't know, miss." Annie looked puzzled. "Shall I go and see?"

"Yes. My compliments, and I want to see him urgently; at once."

"Very well, miss."

Annie, grumbling slightly, left the room. She was not long away, for the manager, Mr. Morton, was not only in the theatre but also in his office. A summons from the great Louella was not to be disregarded; he followed Annie back at once to the star's dressing room.

"You sent for me, Louella?"

"I did, John. Prepare yourself for a shock!"

Mr. Morton prepared himself for a shock; he frowned.

"Don't tell me you're not playing to-night? Don't tell me you're ill?"

"Neither. Now don't interrupt me: just listen."

Mr. Morton listened. He listened with a grave face, but whatever his innermost thoughts were, he obeyed his instructions, he did not interrupt. He listened for quite a long time.

Suddenly Annie fussed into the room.

"Miss Louella! You'll miss your call! You must get ready."

Mr. Morton agreed and said he would come back in the interval. He did, with a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Mr. Morton, as he often pointed out, was nothing if not brave; he knew how to take a shock. He was always the perfect gentleman.

He withdrew the cork from the bottle, and filled the glasses.

"Promise you'll finish the run, Louella?"

"Of course, John. I won't let you down. And there must be time for an engagement!"

"Right. Well, Louella my dear, here's to your perfect happiness. Ye gods, but he's a lucky devil! And of course, if you ever want to come back to the stage . . ."

Louella laughed.

"Come to you? I will, John. But the chances are thousands and thousands to a fraction of one against!"

"I know, I know!" The manager laughed, but added to himself, "They all say that!" not without a certain hope and a certain satisfaction.

"I'm going to put it in the papers to-morrow," said Louella suddenly.

"Very well, my dear. Anything you like. But you will finish the run?"

"Haven't I promised?"

Mr. Morton kissed Louella's hand and withdrew.

Now that her decision had been made, Louella felt a strange peace and happiness. For the first time she realized how much she had been disturbed latterly by this very question, though subconsciously. She smiled to herself: what would Robin say when he saw the announcement in the press? She scribbled a note to her press agent, and despatched it by hand from the theatre.

As soon as the play was over, Louella went straight home. She let herself into her flat, and found the faithful Rose waiting for her. Sandwiches were ready for her in the sitting room.

Louella sat down to consume them. Her thoughts flew back to that interview with Robin early in the morning, and to his words. She looked up at Rose, come in to see if all was in order. How absurd to suspect the faithful Rose, even for one single second.

And then again Robin's answer: "Let me give you just a small example. You'd think that every one at Scotland Yard was to be trusted, wouldn't you? Well there's a snake in the manger, or whatever it is, even there!"

At Scotland Yard!

Once again Louella could feel the cool night air: once again she was looking from her bedroom window to the street below, once again she saw her car draw up at the door and a girl get out and enter the building. Scotland Yard. Once again Louella heard Robin's grave words: a murder, her car outside the house just at the crucial time.

Louella looked up at the ceiling of her room. Above that ceiling there was a flat very similar to hers.

Louella got to her feet with sudden resolution.

"You needn't wait up, Rose," she said, "I'm just going to have a chat with Miss Dale."

"Thank you, miss. Good night, miss."

"Good night, Rose."

Louella left her flat, climbed the flight of stairs, and knocked on the door above.

There came no answer.

Louella knocked again, loudly. She heard footsteps approaching from the other side. The door was opened.

"Good evening, Miss Dale. I do hope I haven't disturbed you?"

"No, no, not at all. I . . . I was just preparing for bed, that's all."

Louella quietly but firmly inserted herself through the door. She had the impression that her visit was extremely unwelcome, but she cared not one jot for that. She chattered away as she closed the door behind her—talked at full speed on all sorts of subjects. But all the time she was watching her unwilling hostess closely.

Miss Dale was wearing a dressing gown. But that was the only sign, that and the fact that she was obviously not fully clothed underneath the dressing gown, that she was going to bed. Every hair on her neat head was perfectly in place—so much so that Louella inwardly hazarded the guess that it had only just been done. She was still wearing stockings, and black shoes.

"May I come in?" Louella suddenly voiced the question, now that it was much too late to turn her out. "I've got something I want to tell you about."

"Oh, yes, please." Miss Dale led the way to her sitting room. Louella watched her covertly: she was evidently anxious about something.

"I'm going to retire from the stage!" said Louella impressively.

"You are?" Miss Dale's flat was smaller than that of Louella underneath; the sitting room door led directly to her bedroom and it was half open now. Miss Dale, as Louella noticed, kept casting sharp glances toward it. The girl was probably in a state of nerves which she could scarcely control, but she recovered herself now: "Good gracious! Really? Do tell me why?"

"Because," said Louella, "I have decided to get married."

"Oh!"

"Why don't you get married, Miss Dale?" Never for one instant did Louella's eyes cease to scrutinise the other's face. Why, thought Louella, did she keep on looking at something behind and above Louella's head as she sat in her chair? "I think," said Louella to herself, "that I shall have a look."

Louella rose to her feet. She started on a long dissertation on the advantages of marriage. She paced the room in the enthusiasm of her words. And she saw what she wanted.

Miss Dale was deeply, apprehensively interested in the clock which was situated just behind the chair in which Louella had been sitting.

"Ha!" said Louella to herself. "Ho! What's all this about?"

Suddenly Louella got the impression that she was really acting at that moment for the first time in her life. Abruptly she realised that she had stumbled on something which might prove of first-class importance to her beloved. Something seemed to make Louella understand that there was a mystery to be solved in that flat, that time was of the utmost importance, and that it was up to her to solve that mystery and take the results to Robin.

Louella sat down again. Miss Dale got up

"I'm terribly sorry," she said with a fine assumption of apology in her manner. "But I've had an awfully tiring day. This Vulture, you know. I can scarcely keep my eyes open: we've had a terribly busy day, as there was trouble with him again last night. Do you mind?" She moved towards the door, held it open. "Please don't think me rude: I'm thrilled at your news. But . . . I do really feel exhausted! May I come in to-morrow evening and talk about it?"

"Why, of course!" Louella was full of regret. "I'm so sorry I've kept you up; so silly of me! I'm afraid when one works at night one rather forgets the ordinary time for going to bed!"

Louella had risen to her feet; she moved across the room towards the door, cast a quick glance through into the bedroom as she passed it, went through. In the hall she said good night. The door of the flat was closed behind her.

Louella ran down the stairs back to her own sitting room. She pulled back the curtains ever so little from the bay window, but enough to give her a clear view of the mews beneath. She smiled to herself. No attempt had been made to put away her car. It was standing at the end of the mews out of the glare of the street lamps.

But Louella, looking for it, saw it. She smiled, a hard smile, an uncharacteristic smile. Dropping the curtains she ran to the telephone. She picked up the book: she found what she sought.

It took her a few minutes to get through to the number.

"Hullo! Is that Scotland Yard? I am speaking for Mr. Robin Murdoch." Louella winked for her own benefit. "Yes. Oh, all right."

Why bother to put her through to the inspector in charge of any Vulture development? More red tape, she supposed. Why not just take the message?

"Yes? Yes, speaking for Mr. Murdoch. Please send an inspector and two men at once to . . . what? Yes, yes at once!"

Louella gave her address. Then she hung up the receiver.

She looked around her: the sandwiches were still on the table in the centre of the room. It suddenly occurred to Louella that she might not get much sustenance that night, unless she took her opportunity. She devoured a couple of the sandwiches.

The policemen were not long in making an appearance. Louella quietly but quickly explained the facts to the inspector in charge. She found him a willing ally. The policemen left her.

Louella took up a position by the window, but first she extinguished the electric light. Then sitting on the window sill, she watched her car.

Abruptly a figure left the shadows of the mews and entered it. Almost at the same time the car began to move.

"Just in time!" breathed Louella exultantly. "Just in time!"

For, out of the shadows, three other figures had made their appearance. The car was stopped.

Louella returned to the electric switch and flooded the room with light. Louella sat down to wait.

She was not alone for more than a few minutes. In the company of the inspector, very much in the company of the inspector, appeared Miss Dale.

But a very different Miss Dale. Her face was haggard now, pale and glistening with the cold sweat of fear. And no longer the trim neat attractive Miss

Dale: she was garbed in rags, in the clothing of the slums.

Louella took control of the proceedings.

"Miss Dale," she said coldly. "You are being held on a charge of stealing my car. It is up to you whether or not that charge is altered very much to your disadvantage. Are you going to tell me precisely what you were off to do?"

Exactly thirty-two minutes later Louella set forth helter-skelter for Robin's club. But that young man had been gone very nearly four hours.

## CHAPTER XXII

ROBIN lifted his glass of beer to his mouth with a grimy right hand. He looked across the table, situated in the darkest corner of that ill-lighted dockland public house, at the dirty French sailor who sat on the other side. Scarcely moving his lips, but speaking so that his companion could hear him, he muttered his disappointment:

"Very nearly closing time, old friend. And nobody's been through that door yet!"

"It is not closing time for us!" answered the Frenchman equally in a whisper. "We are staying on after the others, my old! I do not believe that I have been mistaken: they will meet to-night, I am sure of it!"

Deschamps and Robin had been in the public house for an hour already. Robin, on entering it with his apparently drunken sailor friend, had feared recognition from the fierce-looking barman who had so nearly caused the end of his life not so very long ago; but evidently Deschamps had disguised him well. The man had scarcely glanced at the pair as they had thrown open the door and made their way to the vacant table.

But they had been sitting at that table for an hour, watching the weird collection of strange men come and go, men of all nationalities, men of all callings, but chiefly from the sea or from the underworld of which so little is known even in these days of much-vaunted civilisation. And as yet no one man had moved, or shown any inclination to move, towards that door beside the bar through which the Frenchman and Robin had previously seen them pass, through which the pair had attempted to trespass so unsuccessfully.

"I'm afraid you're going to be proved wrong!" said Robin sorrowfully.

But as he said the words a man entered the room from the street door. He moved across, picking his way through the tables but always keeping to the shadows, until he reached the bar. He ordered a drink, consumed it at one gulp. He paid for it. Then, suddenly, he seemed to sidle to the door and disappear.

"Ah!" said Deschamps.

Robin smiled.

"Sorry, old friend. You were right and I was wrong."

Then began the procession. At equal intervals men arrived from the street and attracting as little attention as possible, they filtered through the door, or first sat at a table for a little while. But, regularly as clockwork, they made for the door and passed to the mystery beyond. And, all the time, the barman watched his customers and paid no attention at all to those who surreptitiously went through the room.

Five had come and gone in this way when the barman, looking at the clock in one corner of the room, remarked loudly:

"Time, please."

Robin looked at Deschamps: the Frenchman winked.

"He will have trouble with that man over there," he said, nodding his head. "When he does, under the table. It is our only chance."

Robin looked in the direction which Deschamps had indicated by his nod: a huge fellow, very drunk, was sprawling over a table; a little man, evidently his companion, was trying rather apprehensively to rouse him.

It was true: there would be trouble. And that trouble would provide just the opportunity which they required. Robin looked behind him quickly: they were in the darkest corner of that ill-lit, lamp-illumined saloon bar: if they were not observed taking cover on the floor behind the table, they stood every chance of passing undiscovered for some time if not for the remainder of the night, or as much of it as they might wish to spend there. So far so good.

"Be ready!"

Deschamps spoke in a low whisper: his voice was scarcely more than a hiss. But Robin heard him and was ready: the barkeeper, having watched all his clients disappear one by one into the street, strode from behind his bar and approached the drunkard's table.

"Now then, you!" he said. "Get aht of 'ere."

The drunkard made no move, but Robin and the Frenchman did. The man's back was turned towards them; in an instant they were on the floor, well concealed from the rest of the room by the table in front of them at which they had just been sitting. Robin, looking out carefully, saw a short scuffle, but the drunken fellow was no match at all for the big barkeeper. He was thrown out into the street, closely followed by his frightened little companion, before he could have realised what had happened to him.

The barman did not lock the door: he merely closed it. Then, whistling some tune, he returned to behind his bar, having first extinguished all his lamps but one. He took out a pipe, filled it in a leisurely manner, lit it, supplied himself with beer, and sat down on a neighbouring chair. Evidently he was entirely unsuspecting of the presence of other human beings in the saloon. The ruse had worked.

Deschamps and Robin, scarcely daring to breathe, waited.

For some time nothing happened: then a man entered from the street. One moment he was not in the room, the next he was; his entry was amazingly soundless, but extraordinarily rapid. From his place of concealment Robin could not see the man's face, but he could just make out his hands. Robin would have known those hands anywhere.

An insane longing came over the youth to leap from his hiding place and assault the Raubvogel. He ached in every limb to get just a little back on this man who had treated him so roughly, but he checked the inclination just in time. To show himself now would be to ruin the plan which he and Deschamps had so carefully prepared, would be to throw away all chance of getting all the gang together.

It had been a narrow squeak: the desire to get some of his own back had been well-nigh overpowering. Robin, now that it was over, found himself faintly surprised that he should have been the subject of such a passionate longing for revenge. He smiled to himself in the darkness: he had only to wait a little longer and revenge in full would be his portion.

But Robin now realised that to wait was not so simple as it sounded. He dared not move lest by some mischance he should make any sound which would give away their presence to the barman; and to remain rigid in position meant that the horrors of cramp and stiffness were to be invited. Already Robin felt an ache in his legs which every minute became more painful.

He was distracted by the sound of the Raubvogel's voice:

"*Ach!* It is cold, Jack, to-night. How many are here?"

"Five," replied the barman.

"Five? Well, you have a vigil to-night. The others are not due for a little time. Has the woman come?"

"Not yet."

"No," said the Raubvogel. "That is right. I remember she does not come till the one before last. Well, we will meet again to say good night."

He passed through the mysterious door.

Robin's heart sank within him. What had the Raubvogel said? "You have a vigil to-night. The others are not due for a little time." Robin felt that, whatever the risk, he simply must move to get some relief for his cramped limbs. Very carefully, very slowly, he changed the position of his legs.

The slight scraping on the floor caused by the movement nearly gave him heart attack, but all the time he kept his eyes glued on the barkeeper's face. The man had picked up a paper and was reading it. He gave no sign of any suspicion, or that he had heard. Robin grinned to himself happily. The strain had been relieved.

And then began an anxious vigil. It was not until an hour had passed that the next figure made his appearance: he passed through quickly, and did no more than nod at the barkeeper. Shortly afterwards another came. Then again there was a long interval.

Suddenly, without any warning, Robin realised that there was a woman in the saloon. He could just see her as she stood for a moment in the doorway. A filthy black shawl covered her head so that he could not see her colouring or features; her clothes were black and stained; she was dressed just as countless other females were dressed in that dismal locality.

"Ha!" said Robin to himself. "We have met before, my dear. Once, at any rate, not so far from here, when you followed me and unfortunately got away when I accosted you."

She was, thought Robin, undoubtedly the woman whom he had seen use that mysterious door on his previous visit to this vile public house. Without a word she went straight for the door and passed through.

Robin saw Deschamps move his head towards him.

He leant forward: Deschamps put his mouth close to Robin's ear.

"The Raubvogel, he say that the woman last but one. After the next, we attack the barkeeper. Be ready!"

Robin nodded. Robin grinned to himself at the prospect of action after this long period of inactivity.

But they had still nearly a quarter of an hour to wait before the tenth and last Vulture made his appearance. He seemed to be in a hurry: he almost ran through the saloon and the next instant was gone.

The barman immediately rose to his feet. He went to the street door and turned the key in the lock. He stooped to place the bolts in position.

And as he did so Deschamps leapt on him with catlike agility. The struggle was over almost before it started, for the man fell forward on the floor and lay still. There had been practically no sound.

Robin, standing by, saw the Frenchman rush to the window and pull down a curtain. With this he made an improvised gag, which he proceeded to fit into his captive's mouth. Suddenly he looked up.

"Quick! Something to tie him up with!"

Robin ran to the bar and looked behind it. There was no rope or string, but several lengths of cloth, evidently used to wipe the tables, at once caught his eye. He seized them, and very soon the barkeeper was laid, gagged and powerless to move, in the corner whence the unexpected attack had burst upon him.

"Now!" said Deschamps in a whisper. "The Scotch policemen!"

Robin laughed to himself. He went to the door, unlocked it, and flashed a small electric torch into the street. Then he waited. Less than two minutes later the men, all in plain clothes, were standing in the saloon. Deschamps addressed himself to the inspector.

"My friend, Mr. Murdoch, and myself are going in there"—he nodded towards the door at the other end of the room—"to see what we can see. You will all stay here. If we are not back in a quarter of an hour, then come to look for us. And, if you please, find us!"

"Yes," said Robin.

The inspector smiled.

"Very good, sir."

Deschamps turned towards the door of mystery. Robin followed him. Deschamps very quietly seized hold of the door handle, turned it, and pushed open the door. Robin, at his heels, followed him through.

They found themselves in a small parlour, which was empty and devoid of furniture. Another door was opposite to them.

"Ha!" said Deschamps. "They are further. Let us go further."

Without an instant's hesitation the Frenchman led the way across the parlour and opened the far door. Robin, his heart in his mouth, followed, and looked over his companion's shoulder.

They were looking into a small yard.

The saloon bar which they had just quitted was evil smelling enough: but its aroma was flowerlike compared to the stench which emanated from this foul yard. Robin involuntarily recoiled.

"Disgusting!" said the Frenchman quietly. "The Minister of Good Health should be informed. I will inform him. Well, our friends the Vultures are not here."

It was true: the yard was empty.

"What do we do now?" asked Deschamps.

"Methinks," said Robin, "that a low-roofed hut exists on yonder side. Shall we investigate, brother?"

"Investigate!" said Deschamps. "That is the word! Let us investigate!"

The pair moved across the yard and found the door of the hut. This they opened and entered. The floor was covered in straw; packing cases were piled up on end at the far side.

"Investigate," said Deschamps, "let us investigate!"

He produced an electric torch and started to rummage about in the straw, and Robin followed suit, moving over the packing cases. But he had scarcely begun when a delighted exclamation from the Frenchman made him turn sharply.

Deschamps pointed.

"I have found him!" he cried in a low voice.

"Found what?"

"Her! The door!"

Robin looked in the direction of his pointed finger. The Frenchman had cleared away most of the covering of straw from one corner of the floor, and now there was disclosed a trapdoor. This, as Robin watched, Deschamps lifted without difficulty and noiselessly. Evidently it had been recently oiled. Robin walked over to the Frenchman's side and by the aid of the torch saw that a flight of stone stairs led downwards.

"Well," he said, "d'you think they're down those steps?"

"They can be nowhere else," said Deschamps shortly. "They came in this way and they are not here. Yet they have not returned. There is no other exit here. Shall we descend?"

"After you!" said Robin with a smile.

Deschamps led the way down, and Robin followed him. There were a dozen steps in all and then Robin saw that they were in a passage apparently dug out of the earth. Down this the two advanced until they came to the far end. Yet another door faced them.

Deschamps pointed to the crack under the door. A streak of light was visible in the dark passage.

*"Voilà!"* he said. "There are the Vultures!"

"Ah!" said Robin.

He was standing directly behind the man he had known as Deschamps for a few days only in actual hours but for what seemed to him an age of time, so much had happened. He had his automatic—his little pistol as the other had called it—in his right hand, the forefinger hooked over the trigger. He pushed the tip of the barrel firmly into the other's ribs.

"Right, Mr. Vulture!" Robin spoke in a low tone, but his voice was exultant. "Come along, then. Just retrace your steps with me and thank you so much for showing me your lair. We are going to raid, but in a few minutes; after you've been safely stowed away. Come along now. . . . I . . ."

He got no further. Hands seemed to come from everywhere in the darkness. One plucked his pistol from his unsuspecting grip, another seized his foot and tripped him up, a third pushed him. Robin fell heavily to the ground. Before he could move or cry, steel manacles encircled his wrists. He was pulled to his feet.

Then abruptly, his attention was concentrated on other things.

The door before which they stood opened slowly, and an ever-widening bright beam of white light shot out into the passage. For a few seconds Robin was blinded by the unexpected brilliance of this illumination; but then, as clear vision returned to him, he saw before him a long table. Before this, pinioned hand and foot, stood four men.

Unable to speak, unable to move, his senses reeling under the staggering unexpectedness of the shock, Robin recognised the pale faces of Sir William Blandyce and Detective-Inspectors Brand and Tudor. The fourth man was also no stranger.

Trussed up like the others, the great French detective, Deschamps, stood before him.

"Good God!"

The very fact of uttering the exclamation seemed to return to Robin power over his faculties. He swung round savagely.

But he did not speak. Robin was staring into the unswerving barrel of an automatic held by the man who had impersonated Deschamps in so complete a manner. But the features of the fellow were no longer visible; a grotesque mask made to resemble the head of a vulture concealed them effectively.

"Enter, Robin Murdoch, enter. Welcome to our home!"

Crestfallen, sick at heart, Robin turned and advanced into the room. There was nothing else which he could do but obey the will of this man.

"Once again we meet, Mr. Murdoch," said a guttural voice.

Robin looked round sharply. For a moment he had a confused impression of ghastly vulture heads all round him, of black silken robes. Then, so swiftly that he was powerless to resist, he felt steel manacles slipped around his ankles none too gently.

"Good God!" said Robin quietly. "You are a prize fool, Robin me lad!"

"Agreed," said the Vulture, with a laugh so sinister, so mirthless, that Robin felt the cold sweat of fear break out upon his temples. "You must excuse us for a moment: we have other work to do. But we shall not be long: then we shall proceed to business."

## CHAPTER XXIII

LINED up against the wall, powerless to move because of steel manacles enclosing wrists and ankles, the four men and Robin stared in front of them at the long refectory table. One figure only sat behind it, an automatic placed within easy reach of his right hand. He was garbed from head to foot in a robe of black silk, and over his headpiece he wore the foul contraption resembling the head of a vulture. But he was an awesome figure because of his great width of shoulder which the black robe could not conceal, an ominous portent of ruthless power and cruelty.

Not one of the prisoners said a word. Robin was too crestfallen to do so; he had been so near complete success, only to find the cup dashed from his lips at the last possible moment. He longed with all his power to break the bond which held him: he tried, he exerted all his strength, but steel is stronger than muscle and he could do nothing. Vainly, the sweat of effort on his forehead, he looked up at his fellow prisoners.

"Bad luck, Robin."

It was Sir William Blandyce who had spoken. Robin suddenly realised the magnificent spirit in which the elder man had said the words. For Robin's capture meant the last hope of deliverance gone: that was obvious. Robin, in his disappointment, could not find words in which to reply. Why, oh why had he not pulled the trigger of his automatic when he had found himself with the chance in that passage just outside the room, and rid the world of one of the worst fiends that had ever encumbered it? For there could no longer be any doubt: the man who had called himself Deschamps could be no other than the Vulture.

The minutes rolled by. The minutes turned themselves into fractions of an hour. Fifteen at least had passed before the door opened.

Then the Vulture, followed by his birds of prey, each one wearing long robes and a fearsome mask made to the likeness of a vulture's head, filed into the room and took their places at the table.

For the life of him Robin could not prevent a sensation of unreality. He knew full well that he and his companions in misfortune stood in dire peril of their lives and that the events which were to follow might make even death welcome; but for all that, the spectacle was so strange, so utterly unexpected, so monstrous in this twentieth century in which he lived, that it might well have come out of some dreadful nightmare. He closed his eyes, and made a great effort to wake: he opened them again, half hoping to see the white ceiling of the bedroom in his flat. Instead he found himself staring at the horrors who sat there behind that table taken from some old monastery, silent as ever, vile in their grim purpose.

Suddenly the leader, he who signed himself the Vulture obviously, and who was seated at the centre of the table, began to speak. The voice was utterly different now to what it had been while the man was impersonating Deschamps the Frenchman. Gone was all the silken softness, to be replaced by a quality of harshness and cold cruelty the like of which Robin had seldom if ever heard. And underlying this his listeners thought they could detect a faint trace of arrogance, of self-satisfaction. An impression which was amply borne out by his words:

"I think we should come to an understanding, Robin Murdoch. In one sense I feel I must congratulate you—that you should have guessed that I was not what I seemed to be denotes either a mistake on my part, which I doubt, or extreme acuteness on yours. I am prepared to allow you a certain intelligence."

"Thank you so much," said Robin.

"Not at all. But tell me, just how did you come to suspect my identity?"

Robin remained silent. The Vulture laughed.

"It's no good refusing to obey my requests," he said with a smile, but such a caricature of a smile that Robin shuddered involuntarily in the face of it. "You can hope for no help now, my friend. Those excellent policemen from Scotland are all trussed up and out of harm's way upstairs. We were busy with them just now: that is why we had to leave you for a moment. I returned to them and told them to come with me: one by one they descended the stepladder—one by one as they reached the passage they were silently overpowered. So you can hope for no help—no help at all. Now will you answer me?"

Robin hesitated. The Vulture's last words had shattered any hope which he still harboured: without those men upstairs there was indeed no chance of deliverance. The ease with which the Vulture had completely outwitted them all infuriated Robin—but now there was no good in losing his temper. Robin came to the conclusion that while there was life there was hope—and that therefore the longer he kept the Vulture engaged in conversation, the better it might be for them.

"Well, it came upon me like this," he said slowly. "In the first place, I never saw you except disguised: that struck me as being odd. There was no need for such violently elaborate methods. Secondly, I found out from the inspector at Hampstead that you did not get hold of him until nearly two o'clock—that was odd because I know that it was certainly not *after* one that I lost consciousness at the Raubvogel's hands. Thirdly, I looked at my watch just before you left the room in Belgrave Square where you and I and Sir Henry held a council of war. The time then was nearly five o'clock—ten minutes *to* in point of fact. Yet I found from the inspector on duty that you had not left the house until five minutes *past*. Plenty of time to visit the roof and deal with poor Inspector Standing. Well, that made me pretty certain. But I wanted something even more sure. So I arranged for you to be photographed from every conceivable angle. Your disguises weren't much use to you then! I had a portrait of Deschamps sent over from Paris: a few measurements convinced me that you were not the Frenchman. The width of your eyes taken from pupil to pupil, in proportion to your width of head, taken from temple to temple, gave a different figure to that which resulted from the same calculation on the other photograph. Is that enough?"

The Vulture's voice came back evenly, suave as ever.

"You are clever, Robin Murdoch. But if there is anything else I should like to hear it."

"There is something else," said Robin with a malicious smile, "and it proves, Mr. Vulture, that you are not so clever as you think you are. Your broken French—I mean English—was not *even*. You used too many English expressions—idioms almost—which didn't go with the rest of your sentences." Robin laughed recklessly. "It was rotten! I began to suspect that almost before anything else! When the Raubvogel told me you were a master of disguise, I became almost sure. The other things only confirmed my suspicions!"

For a long moment there was silence. Then the Vulture spoke:

"Do not be insolent! It will do you no good. Let us proceed to business."

"Just one moment!" Robin did not care how far he went now; he had given up hope of rescue, he knew himself defeated and acknowledged it. But there were things on his side which he wanted to know. "I've answered your question: answer me mine. Why, knowing that I might be a thorn in your side, did you let me go on in freedom?"

The Vulture laughed.

"Fair enough: I will answer you. Because, my friend, you were in charge of the case against me.

And every time information was given to you, it was also given to me. An admirable arrangement!"

He laughed loudly.

Robin looked at the masked and robed figure seated beside the Vulture at the long table.

"Miss Dale wasn't good enough for you, then," he said quietly.

"Ah! So you know also whom she is?" The Vulture's voice was even, but there seemed to be an undercurrent of passion in his tone. Abruptly it became apparent. "Leave the lady out of it, if you please," he thundered. Then, just as suddenly, he became his normal urbane self.

"Before proceeding to your trial," he said, "I think a few words of explanation will not be out of place. You cannot blame us for the methods which we are taking against you. If any one of us fell into your hands—into the hands of the police—you would put us on our trial in exactly the same way. You would give us a fair trial, certainly—yours shall be fair as well. Counsel shall defend you as well as prosecute. But I shall be the supreme judge. Do you realise what that means, I wonder?"

He paused and laughed. Robin shivered; the tones of that caricature of mirth were so cruel that he felt a sense of impending disaster quite foreign to his usual self. Robin began to wonder whether this man were really mad, whether he suffered from a diseased brain. All this pantomime of fanciful dress, all this amazing ceremony over a travesty of a trial, all pointed towards this fact; and suddenly, as the portent of his next words became clear, Robin became quite certain.

"You must understand that the position here is in every way precisely the reverse to that in an ordinary court of law. You are being tried for interference with us—for being a hindrance to our activities which from our point of view are praiseworthy. In consequence, your police activities are crimes—heinous crimes, since you are a menace to our very existence. You have heard of men being severely punished for being habitual criminals—you are all in danger of even more ruthless treatment for being habitual policemen!"

He chuckled, but this time there was a suggestion of maniacal hilarity in the laughter. Robin found it difficult to decide which sound was the less unpleasant, presaged less trouble to them.

"Well," suddenly remarked the Vulture, "I think that is all the preamble which is necessary unless any of you gentlemen would like to ask a question?"

"Yes," said Brand promptly.

"Well, what is it?"

"Do two sandbaggings count in mitigation of sentence?"

He grinned unexpectedly. Robin laughed: the dour Scotsman was not to be done out of his jest even in a plight such as this.

"You haven't been convicted yet," replied the Vulture sternly.

"What a hope!" said Brand.

"In a sense I sympathise with your last remark," said the Vulture after a short pause. He spoke very quietly, but there was an intensity, a subdued passion in his voice which made his words plainly audible to his listeners. "So many men have gone into your dock in your courts of law with just such a feeling of hopelessness in their hearts. What hope had they? What hope should any of us, sitting here in judgment over you, have were we to fall into your hands? But do not lose courage! Perhaps counsel for the defence will think of something marvellous, some ingenious argument which will break down the prosecution!"

He laughed again: a sound which in this instance sounded so malevolent that even Brand and Tudor felt themselves a trifle awed.

"Are there any other questions before proceedings commence?"

There was a long silence now, pregnant with suspense.

Suddenly Sir William Blandyce, losing all patience, simultaneously lost all control.

"For God's sake get on with it!" he cried. "Cut out all this bally nonsense. What are you going to do to us?"

"Sir William!" The Vulture's voice was suave, biting. "How many men have you sent to the gallows, and to long terms of imprisonment, without subjecting them to the long wait before they knew their fates, necessary because of the workings of the law?"

"But they at least were given a fair trial: they at least were judged on the merits of the case."

"And so shall you be."

"When?" remarked Robin. "After death?"

The infuriated Vulture half rose in his chair and for a moment Robin thought he had gone too far. But slowly, without a word, the grotesque figure in front of him relaxed and resumed his seat.

"Anything further which you may say," he said, "may be used in evidence against you."

For a few moments he remained silent, examining a piece of foolscap which he had produced from the silken folds of his robe.

Again the sensation of unreality came to Robin and bade fair to overwhelm him. Could it be true, this ghastly performance slowly being enacted before his eyes? Robin, for a few seconds, realised an entirely impersonal viewpoint, and he very nearly burst into slightly hysterical laughter. Policemen being tried because they were policemen! Men standing their trial because they were actively engaged in the support of law and order!

The Vulture's harsh voice brought him back to stark reality with a jerk.

"Eight, you will prosecute. Four, you will defend. The charges please."

A figure rose from his chair on the right-hand side of the table.

"Sir William Blandyce Commissioner of Police. Charged by virtue of the appointment which he holds, and I submit that there can be no defence."

The Vulture turned towards the other end of the table.

"Does your client plead guilty or not guilty?"

Another figure rose to his feet.

"Sir William Blandyce is undoubtedly the Commissioner. I offer no defence."

"Guilty!" said the Vulture shortly. "I will deliver judgment later. Next."

"Detective-Inspector Tudor, of Scotland Yard. Charged with . . ."

"Just one moment." The Vulture spoke quietly, facing Tudor and Brand. "Do either of you deny that you have been actively engaged in the pursuit of criminals for the major part of your lives?"

"I do not," said Tudor.

"Actively and successfully," said Brand. "Excuse apparent conceit, please."

"I will excuse nothing!" said the Vulture in a vicious hiss. "Your entirely uncalled-for remark, boasting of your success in what constitutes the charge, I shall take into consideration when pronouncing sentence. Next!"

The prosecutor again rose to his feet.

"Monsieur Deschamps. Charged with being a well-known Parisian detective. Further charged with interfering in affairs in no way connected with his own work in Paris."

"I object!" promptly remarked the figure for the defence, bobbing from his chair.

"Why?"

"I object to the second charge. Why did he come over here?"

Eight, for the prosecution, laughed.

"Presumably for a fat fee. Blood money."

"Precisely." Four, for the defence, seemed quite worked up, and Robin stared at him in amazement. "It is his trade, I do not deny that. But, although our trade is exactly the reverse, yet what we do, we do for money. The charge must fail!"

The Vulture chuckled; evidently he was getting much amusement out of this horrible mockery.

"Well done, Four," he said. "A pretty point. But the first charge is quite sufficient in itself. Guilty. Next."

"Robin Murdoch. Charged with unwarranted interference, in that quite unnecessarily he joined forces with the police. Further charged with declining to accept an opportunity offered him of leaving the country and avoiding all unpleasant possibilities."

"A serious charge," said the Vulture. "Any defence?"

"The prisoner had better speak for himself," said Four. "I can think of nothing."

"Well?"

Robin realised that the Vulture was looking towards him. He grinned.

"Go on!" he said. "Pronounce sentence. Promulgate, or whatever they call it."

"I shall," said the Vulture quietly. Something in his voice riveted the attention of his listeners, a quality of cold fury, hitherto held in check and about to be unleashed. Robin, all of them in fact, had done their utmost to keep a brave front during the amazing proceedings, but now the situation was changing. That Robin sensed at once. It had pleased this half-crazed being, self-styled the Vulture, to play with them as a cat plays with a mouse; but now he was tiring of the game. The atmosphere was tense: even the Vulture's followers seemed to realise it, and sat motionless in their chairs, scarcely breathing.

"You must understand," said the Vulture quietly, (and Robin found himself astounded that a human voice could sound so inhuman, so harshly cruel,) "that you are all far better out of the way. Up to the present I have kept some of you my prisoners in order to hamper the activities of your fellows who were free. But the necessity no longer arises: without wishing to be fulsome, I must acknowledge that before me stand the only men sufficiently efficient to have worried me. You have all been convicted in fair trial; you shall all therefore suffer sentence of death."

He paused. No one stirred. Robin felt the sweat gathering on his brow, felt a sensation of nausea. Was this to be the end? His thoughts flew back to Louella as he had last seen her, dainty, fragile, glorious in her supreme attraction. Was he never to see her again, never to hear her sweet voice?

"There are two reasons why you must die," went on the Vulture. "The first, that although I could keep you prisoners until our fortunes are made"—he waved his hand embracing all those seated round him—" it would not be fair on my successors then to release you. Again, your deaths will provide me with a great opportunity of impressing the British public with my power, for I shall announce your fate in the press, and that very morning your bodies will be found, neatly lined up, in the very middle of Hyde Park. A nice idea!"

He chuckled. Robin, for one mad moment, struggled violently with his bonds in a desperate endeavour to get at this callous fiend. But the next instant he relaxed. What was the use? They had been hopelessly outwitted: in that sense they deserved all that was coming to them. And they were utterly in the power of the man who sat before them. The steel manacles were strong; nothing but a key could release the prisoners.

"It only remains, then, to decide on the method of death. I have given careful consideration to the matter, and I have come to the conclusion that in all cases, except that of Robin Murdoch, your dreaded friend the Raubvogel shall execute. But in the case of Murdoch, so quick a death is hardly fitting. He has asked for trouble—he shall have it!"

The Vulture rose, and with him all those other weird figures round the table.

"You shall die first, Robin Murdoch. You shall have this honour because I require your friends to sign your death certificate."

He laughed loud and long, mirthlessly, triumphantly.

"But you will have this consolation; your certificate will be very different to the common form. It will be a minute description of your pains and tribulations and their causes, and will be signed by the other four as witnesses. It will then be despatched to the public via the press."

He paused a moment. Then he gave an order:

"Lay him on the table."

Two of the figures immediately detached themselves from the others and advanced on Robin. Powerless to resist, yet boiling within, Robin felt himself hoisted as if he weighed next to nothing and placed on his back on the table. Leather straps were passed quickly over his chest and legs, and firmly secured. Robin realised that it was no longer possible for him to move.

"Let the performance begin!"

Yet another figure moved away to a far corner of the room, and pulled a small lever in the wall, hitherto unnoticed by the prisoners. Immediately Robin heard something splash just above his head. There was an instant's pause and then it came again.

"Bunglers!" The Vulture's voice was high-pitched, irritated. "Idiots! Move him!"

Many hands worked at once to do their Chief's bidding. Robin felt the straps untied, heard the drops cease from just beyond his head. Some one had pushed the lever back again.

Robin gritted his teeth, bit his lips until he could taste the blood in his endeavours to retain control of himself. The cold sweat of acute fear had made its presence felt upon his forehead: he battled with a violent desire to cry out for help. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the ashen faces of Sir William Blandyce and the other three detectives watching him wide-eyed, as though spellbound. All round him he caught fleeting glimpses of the hideous vulturelike masks as they moved around him.

Robin closed his eyes, the better to bear the frightful situation. Immediately there flashed before his brain a vision of the sparkling eyes, the smiling ruby lips of the bewitching Louella as he had last seen her such a short time before. "Take care of yourself!" she had asked of him; had he done so? Robin's lips twisted into a smile. Robin heard himself laugh bitterly.

"You have no reason to laugh, Robin Murdoch," Robin heard the Vulture's voice, ferocious in its intensity as he barked out the words. "Something is about to fall on your forehead, drop by drop. It burns, my friend, it burns. Straight into the brain, my friend, so that first you go mad with the agony and then you die. No, you have no reason to laugh! Do you remember the four men of the bodyguard whom you saw in the house in Belgrave Square? They were made hideous, eh? So are you about to be made hideous!"

He paused.

"Do you know what it is? It is the juice which can be found inside any of the giant cactus plants of tropical countries. One touch of this stuff and the skin gives place to an open sore. Continued application and . . . well, I have told you, and you have seen. But for you I have diluted the stuff—it will take longer to act, it will hurt you more!"

Robin had been moved while the Vulture was speaking and was now in such a position that the drops from the small tank, which he now noticed for the first time fixed to the ceiling just above him, must inevitably strike his forehead.

"God! Let me get at them!"

It was a prayer more than a cry, but it came out as one great sob from Robin's soul. The spirit of the youth had not deserted him. He struggled with his bonds, exerting all his might, but to no purpose. They held firm; Robin sank back exhausted.

"What about his head, Chief? He can move it."

It was one of the satellites who had spoken, and the Vulture answered at once.

"No matter. It will serve to prolong the entertainment. Are we ready?"

"All ready!"

"Good!"

Then once again the Vulture gave vent to his mirthless, merciless laugh.

"It does not pay, Robin Murdoch," he said savagely, "to have any truck with things which do not concern you. As each drop falls upon your forehead, and burns into your brain, remember in your agony that you have brought it all upon yourself."

The Vulture approached the table and leant over it so that his grotesque mask was but a few inches from Robin's face. The youth could see, through the slits in that ghastly headdress, the eyes of the man who had brought about his doom. Robin shuddered: they seemed to shine with a ferocity totally inhuman; they seemed to be the cold, cruel eyes of the bird of prey which had given this foul fiend, the Vulture, his name. Robin felt a feeling of nausea come over him: he struggled with it; the sweat broke out upon his forehead, he felt weak and ill, but he kept control of his nerves. "While there's life there's hope!" growled Robin to himself. "While there's life there's hope!"

The Vulture stood back, laughed again, turned to the man by the lever on the wall.

But before he could speak, before he could give the order for that inhuman torture to begin, there came an interruption.

A woman's voice cried out to stop.

The Vulture hesitated for a moment, then turned to the smallest of his followers, to the masked figure of the woman. She was standing next to the crestfallen figure of Brand.

"Hullo!" he said softly. "What is this, my dear? Why this sudden squeamishness?"

There came no answer.

"You are taking advantage of your position with us," went on the Vulture, and there was something sinister, something dreadfully evil in his suave tone of voice. "I am the person who gives orders here. Please understand that I will not tolerate any further interference with my wishes."

He turned once more towards the man at the wall. But even as he did so the figure of Detective-Inspector Brand sprang to life and leapt forward. The next moment the Vulture and Brand fell heavily to the floor, struggling violently.

Pandemonium was immediately let loose. But, even as Brand was overpowered, Tudor leapt into the fray to create a fresh diversion. The small figure of the woman, garbed in robe and mask as were all the rest, slipped unnoticed behind the real Deschamps and unlocked the steel manacles which held him prisoner by both wrists and ankles. "Go to it!" she whispered to him. "Gain time! Time means everything!" Quickly, as she had gone from Brand to Tudor, from Tudor to Deschamps, she passed from the Frenchman to Sir William Blandyce and released him. With a snort like a bull the stout Commissioner ran forward.

"Take that, you hound!" he cried. "Take that! and that! and that!"

But it was an uneven fight which could have but one ending. The Vultures were too many, too strong, and above all they were well armed. A few minutes later and the four prisoners were again with their backs to the wall, steel manacles replaced, with cuts and bruises only, to show for their brave efforts.

The Vulture, out of the new silence, suddenly spoke.

"And who," he said, "released the prisoners?"

His voice was fierce: it cut like a whiplash across his followers.

"She did!" cried a voice. "She did. The woman!"

It was the man by the lever who had spoken.

"I saw her. . . . I . . ."

He got no further. A tall figure standing by the Vulture clutched his arm:

"Hist! *Was ist das?*"

The effect was electrical; each figure stood tense and silent after the Raubvogel's words. The man beside the lever stood stock-still, one hand outstretched.

Out of the silent night there came the sound of footsteps. Then a voice, a woman's voice cried out:

"Here! Here! Oh, thank God!"

Robin shut his eyes; he felt that he was dreaming. He wondered what unkind tricks the fates were playing on him.

For he had heard Louella's voice.

A figure threw off its mask. It was the figure of the woman. But it was not the neat regular features of Miss Dale which met the staggered gaze of all those present: Louella, the beauty of the theatre, beloved of the public, dashed pale and wide-eyed to the door and threw it open before any one could stop her. Armed policemen seemed all at once to fill the room.

Robin opened his eyes and turned his head. But it was not the men in blue whom Robin saw: at their head, and straight across the room towards his helpless self, ran Louella, his beloved.

Just as she reached him every light went out: the room was plunged into darkness.

"Dear, dear," said the Vulture's voice. "How very unexpected. Still, the more the merrier!"

And then started a fight, the closing of law and order against these birds of prey. Lying helpless in the darkness, in an agony of mind for the safety of Louella, Robin heard reports and saw flashes as revolvers and automatic pistols sent out their vicious messengers of sudden death. But in another corner of the room, Inspector Brand had hopped and jumped to where he knew the light switch to be, and having found it, gripped it in his teeth and flooded the room with unexpected light. That was the end. Numbers told, and one by one the Vultures were overpowered.

"My dear!" said a soft voice in Robin's ear. "Oh, my dear! Thank God they were in time!"

# CHAPTER XXIV

"WELL? Am I to be scolded?"

Louella looked at Robin, seated in one of the armchairs of her sitting room. She poured out a stiff brandy and soda, and made him take it. The youth was still looking desperately ill, but there was a quiet, almost a serene expression of contentment in his eyes.

"You should be, you know, Louella! Risking your life like that! But never, never will I be able to thank you enough, dear!"

Louella smiled.

"Shut up, darling. I thought you were wonderful, all of you, when that brute of a Vulture was going through that ghastly mock trial."

"Is this a meeting of a mutual admiration society?"

Louella burst out laughing.

"Oh, Robin, will you never be serious? I do hope you won't! I just love you as you are."

Robin flushed.

"Louella dear, tell me how did you get there?"

Over an hour had gone by since the overthrow of the Vulture and his gang; but whilst the others were still busy with the captives and an attempt to recover some of the loot secreted away by the gang, Louella had insisted on at once removing the half-fainting Robin to her flat. The gentle ministrations of the girl and Rose, wakened from her sleep, had restored Robin to something like his normal self.

"It's rather a long story!"

Robin looked out of the window at the dawn breaking with great rapidity over the sky.

"It's almost morning," he said. "It isn't worth while going to bed now. Tell me, Louella."

"D'you remember," she started, with a little smile, "telling me that there was a leakage of information from Scotland Yard? D'you remember telling me that my car had been noticed on the scene of a Vulture murder?"

"Yes."

"Well, after my experience of last night I began to put two and two together. I knew that Miss Dale lived in the flat above, I knew that she worked at Scotland Yard. When I got home last night I dismissed Dent and the car: but later I saw, from this window, that he had not put it away. So I thought I'd do a little investigating—I went up to see Miss Dale."

"Louella!"

"Why not? I talked my head off to her, and suddenly I realised that she was anxious, nervous about something. I soon found out what it was—the girl can't act. She was worried about the time I was keeping her from some appointment, in spite of the fact that she had told me she was going to bed. So I put two and two together and by the grace of God made the result four—you see, I had not forgotten the girl I had seen leave my car the night before."

She paused and lit a cigarette.

"I rang up Scotland Yard and asked for help. An inspector and two men came round. They were in time: just as Miss Dale was about to be driven off by Dent they arrested them both."

Thoughtfully she looked out of the window for a moment; then she turned once more to Robin.

"Darling, you've got to do what you can for Miss Dale! Who was it said that in every successful murder case there must inevitably be an informant? Miss Dale fulfilled that duty. I told her all that was known about the Vulture—she believed me. I told her that her only chance of saving her life was to tell the truth."

For a moment Louella's lovely face clouded.

"She broke down. Completely and absolutely. She told the whole story of what the Vulture had planned for that night. I rushed to stop you going: you had already gone."

Louella smiled suddenly.

"But all's well that ends well, isn't it, darling? Oh, I went through such torture when I thought you had gone—for good. But . . . well, you know the rest."

"Not quite. Why did you go down to the docks?"

"What else could I have done?" said the girl simply. "The inspector had rushed off to collect a squad and follow you. But that would take a little time. I borrowed Miss Dale's clothes and took her place; she told me exactly what to do. You see, I thought if they didn't arrive in time, I might be of some use."

"To delay matters? To gain time?"

"Yes. Thank goodness the key to those handcuffs was lying on the table."

Robin rose to his feet: so did the girl. He took her hands in his.

"Louella dear, you did it nobly! To you only do we owe our lives. You . . ."

Louella gently disengaged one of her hands and put it over Robin's mouth.

"Please!" she said, "I'm conceited enough as it is!"

"You! Conceited!"

"Will you stop? I think you'd better go to bed, Robin. You're very, very done, and no wonder! Besides, what will the neighbours say if they find you here in the morning?"

Robin smiled.

"As you will, my lady."

As Robin stepped into the street, the first rays of the morning sun began to show themselves as great pink slashes in the sky. He walked quietly in the direction of his club. Reaction had set in after the nerve strain of recent hours, and the youth knew that Louella had said nothing but the truth. He was tired out, not merely in body but also in spirit.

His way led him past a tube station. The first editions of the morning papers were being distributed: a van was standing by the kerb. Robin wondered if by some miracle the press could yet have got hold of the story: he bought a paper.

Walking onwards, idly, he looked at the front page.

Robin stopped dead. Robin couldn't believe his eyes.

Robin dropped the paper, turned round and ran for all he was worth the way he had come.

In through the portals. Up the stairs two steps at a time.

He banged at Louella's door. She opened it to him.

"Louella! Louella! What does it mean?"

"Don't shout," said Louella. "Come in. That's better. What does what mean? You look as if you had seen a ghost!"

"I've seen the morning paper."

"Oh!" said Louella. "I see. That's it, is it?"

"But why?" Robin seized one of her hands. "Why?"

"Because," said Louella, slowly and distinctly, "I think it's a good thing for everybody to have free speech. And since your tongue was tied while I was on the stage—well, I thought I'd better leave it. Robin! Robin! What on earth are you doing?"

"Locking the door," said Robin. "Rose may be a good girl, but three's no company. Now she can't disturb me. Louella, my own beloved, will you marry me?"

"Robin!" said Louella. "You've *got* to go and get some rest. Come and ask me in the morning: then I'll give you my answer. But . . . well, I don't think I shall be offended if you bring the ring!"